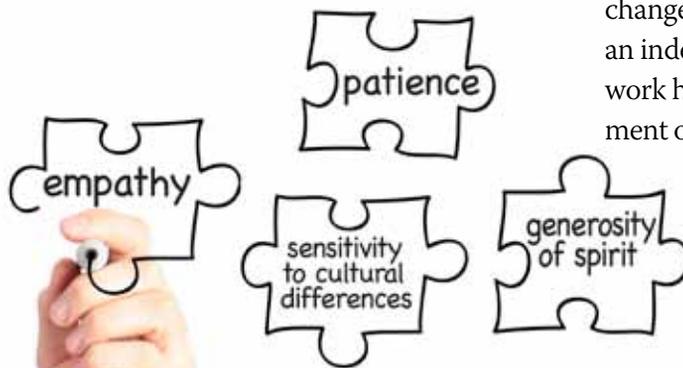


Changing Paradigms: Training New International Student Advisers

HOW ARE NEWCOMERS TO THE FIELD of international advising being trained to do their work in 2011? An effective adviser to international students has always needed a constellation of skills: keen attention to detail and managerial deftness coupled with an underpinning of characteristics like empathy, patience, sensitivity to cultural differences, and generosity of spirit. The events of September 11, 2001, changed our country and the world; so, too, have they made the job of international student adviser even more demanding, adding to it the need to understand and stay abreast of the increasingly complex and ever-changing governmental policies and regulations affecting international students and exchange scholars.

As June Sadowski-Devarez, an independent trainer, observes, compliance work has mushroomed since the U.S. Department of Homeland Security set up its Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS) in 2003. Sadowski-Devarez is even seeing institutions hire recent law school graduates who are immigration attorneys as directors of international offices.



Conversations with numerous advisers revealed that international offices use many different approaches to train incoming advisers, approaches that vary with the size, resources, and style of the office, and—inevitably—the temperament and values of those in charge.

Ideally, every institution would offer incoming advisers a full range of training opportunities. The reality however, as Lisa Harris, international student adviser at San Jose University, points out, is that this is not always feasible. International student offices are often stretched quite thin, in terms of resources and personnel which can limit options.

One example of a formal training program can be seen at the International Office at Northwestern University. Nick Seamons, assistant director of student services there, describes his “onboarding” process (onboarding is a business management term used to describe procedures that help new employees become productive members of an organization). Northwestern’s is divided into three two-week sections, with new elements added at each juncture. In the first two weeks, there is some shadowing of senior advisers (more on this technique later), along with instruction about SEVIS and the university’s database. The second two weeks involve more hands-on advising (with a senior adviser in the room) and practicing with SEVIS and the university’s database. In the third set of two weeks, the newcomer is given autonomy to gather information

and get used to one-on-one encounters. This segment is critical for getting used to relationships with students. Karen Keefe-Guzikowski, associate director of international student and scholar services at Binghamton University, State University of New York, says, "Offices need to be open to the idea that you will be providing some kind of training for six to twelve months. Our work changes during the course of the year and you need to go through that cycle." Seamons takes the idea even further. "I think of professional development in terms of several calendar-year cycles," he says. "In the first year, the newcomer learns processes, the atmosphere of the environment, the databases, getting acquainted with students, how things work. In year two, the individual has more autonomy to take on projects (for example, orientation) as they have been done in the past. And in year three, the person can modify existing programs and take on new initiatives," he explains.

Seamons acts as a mentor in his office. "I meet weekly with each member of my team, on a one-on-one basis; we address work issues and take the time to focus on areas of interest, on areas of strength and weakness, to determine how best to navigate through them. Each quarter we meet to discuss professional goals, developmental goals, and performance objectives. I think everything depends on having not only a supportive supervisor but someone willing to mentor and foster a relationship," says Seamons.

The Value of Mentoring

Everyone may have a supervisor; not everyone has a mentor. The distinction is one of accessibility and the nature of the relationship. Amanda Enriquez is international programming assistant at Northwest College, a community college where international student enrollment has jumped from about 30 in 2003 to 110 today. En-

riquez articulates the benefits of having a mentor in the most vivid terms. "I never feel alone. My supervisor is around all the time, available to me literally 24 hours a day, weekends and holidays. She introduces herself as my mentor rather than my boss (although she is that). I consider myself very fortunate to feel there is someone out there I can trust and go to when I feel the need."

Shawna L. Szabo, assistant director of international student and scholar services at Binghamton University, expresses similar feelings: "We work in a team environment. So I can look to anyone in the office to help me learn more and I learn from them every day. I would identify my direct supervisor as a mentor and a friend. Not everyone can say this."

Amy Fillo, international scholar adviser at Washington University in St. Louis, points out that having a mentor can be especially precious to a newcomer from another field. "If a new person lacks familiarity with immi-



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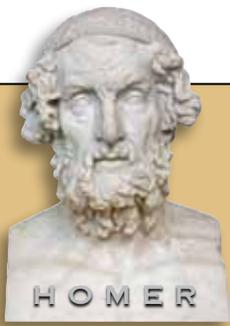
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MENTORING, an activity widely used in the education, not-for-profit, and commercial sectors, has passed into the vernacular. The first recorded use of the word mentor was in Homer's *The Odyssey* (Mentor was the trusted friend of Ulysses). Almost three millennia later, a Frenchman, François Fénelon, wrote a novel, the most reprinted book in the eighteenth century, in which a young king has a wise and experienced guide and counselor named Mentor. This became a common noun in both French and English, and is now also used as a verb. Merriam-Webster gives the first known use of the word mentee (one who is being mentored), a synonym for protégé, as 1965.

gration regulations or some background in student services and counseling, mentorship becomes much more important," she says.

Keefe-Guzikowski, in the profession nearly a decade, exemplifies the supportive aspects of mentoring, pointing out that in addition to teaching the how and the what, the mentor's role is to recognize and foster a person's skills and to make sure that the university knows what an asset the person is to the institution. "We want to foster progress and success," she says.

Shadowing as Mentoring

Shadowing can be considered a form of mentoring, but unlike training or mentoring per se, it is usually designed to have quite specific time limits. At Northwestern, when newcomers shadow experienced advisers in the second two-week training segment, they will shadow several advisers to get a sense of the differing styles of different advisers. Many institutions provide shadowing opportunities to new advisers, to give them real-life exposure to the spectrum of issues that can arise.

While the importance of hands-on training—through real encounters or simulations—cannot be overemphasized, providing information via reading material is another mode of training and many offices develop manuals on their specific procedures and practices. These are not static documents. Ideally, if not always, they are drafted as a team effort and are often reviewed and rewritten. They may also cover the culture of the office, its goals and values, even how advisers dress and how they build a team. The Binghamton Office of International Student and Scholars Services

puts out a weekly newsletter. The office uses checklists for all its primary functions, following the application to make sure each is handled in a consistent way. "The checklist is important in training, giving a new person a safety net," says Keefe-Guzikowski. "You receive a checklist as you start on a new area and work with an experienced person; it organizes a very complex process," she says.

An office may supplement its own training with other institutional programs. As Nancy Hernandez, director of international student and scholar services at the Biscayne Bay Campus of Florida International University, says, "Our Division of Student Affairs has a formal Professional Development Program. Our office encourages our staff to participate in the staff development committee's programs. There are workshops throughout the year on current student affairs issues. Sometimes the workshops are technical, with instruction, for example, on how to develop a survey online."

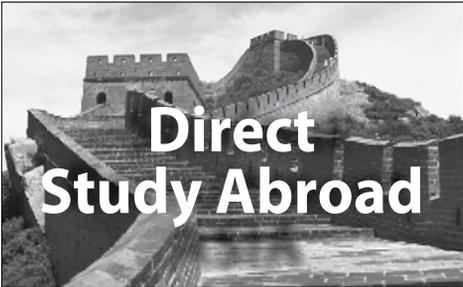
Offices may use various combinations of hands-on experience and reading materials to train newcomers. But one constant and essential element of training—in one-person offices as well as larger settings—is interaction with others. In some institutions, this includes an explicit culture of intra-office teamwork, complete with periodic retreats. But interaction with individuals outside the institution is recognized as one of the most valued training mechanisms and in this context, NAFSA is a universally prized training resource. Joann Ng Hartmann, associate director at The University of Tennessee Knoxville Center for International Education, for example, says, "The *NAFSA Adviser's Manual* is our Bible. We check

NAFSA's Web page every day. We subscribe to its listserv. But none of this beats going to a NAFSA workshop," she emphasizes. AnnaMaria Murphy is international student services representative and primary designated school official, at St. Petersburg College, Gibbs Campus. In the profession for about one year, she was able to meet newcomers and seasoned trainers at various NAFSA workshops. "I have met many great people at the conference and we continue to be a resource to each other when needed."

Ng Hartmann and many others say that being a presenter at a NAFSA workshop is itself a kind of training. "I never pass up a chance to train," says Ng Hartmann, who has been at Tennessee for 15 years. "I enjoy sharing the information, the excitement of the younger people coming in and their excitement with the profession. And I still learn whenever I make a presentation, learning from others and exploring whether we should rethink our policies and processes. I encourage newcomers to submit a session proposal," she says. Amanda Enriquez went to NAFSA's national conference last year; this year she will attend the regional, and will be a presenter at the meeting in Vancouver. Sara Fleenor, coordinator of international student services at Laramie County Community College, is largely self-trained, by reaching out, first to the American Association of Community Colleges and then to NAFSA. When she started out, seven years ago, international student enrollment was 13; now it is 85. She attends the state meeting, with Colorado, every year, and goes to the national NAFSA conference every other year. Fleenor will be a presenter at the national conference and she too affirms that presenting is a good training mechanism.

Networking

When asked about some key tips for newcomers to the field, being proactive was high on the list: network, network, network. Lisa Harris advises seeking out other designated school officials. If there are no others on campus, "contact other schools in your area," she says. "It doesn't matter if a small school contacts a large state university." And she adds, "of course, take NAFSA workshops." This advice



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to reach out is not limited to newcomers, Ng Hartmann emphasizes. "To this day, I'll call a colleague. I believe in picking up the phone and running a scenario by someone else," she says. Advisers can do this on site, of course, but as more and more advisers have specialized areas, there may be a need to go to specialists in another institution. "Everyone used to be a generalist," Ng Hartmann points out, "but the field is constantly changing."

Advisers often use the terms "gray areas" or "puzzle solving" in describing the nature of their work, now that government policies and regulations have become such an important part of their profession. Many questions do not have immediate black and white answers but the response given can have substantial consequences. Amy Fillo was not alone in stressing the responsibilities of the job. Alexis Akagawa, international student adviser/program coordinator in the Office of Student Affairs at Minneapolis College of Art and Design, who has served as president of the Minnesota International Educators (MIE) Group (most but not all members also belong to NAFSA), is an active networker. While her institution has only 13 international students, other MIE members have thousands. They share professional advice and help newcomers.

New Skills Required

To what extent do newcomers to the field need new skills? To be sure, they have to master the use of databases, both governmental and institutional. They may participate in webinars, a neologism for a Web-based seminar. They will probably work on Web content, if not Web design, which is usually a responsibility of IT specialists. They may use new communication tools, like Skype, or live chatting and Facebook, to respond to queries from students abroad. A possible downside of using some of these new tools is that students may expect their advisers to be available round-the-clock.

"We need to manage their expecta-

tions," says Akagawa. On the other hand, she points out one example of a sometimes overlooked positive consequence of the new social networking opportunities: "New incoming students from the People's Republic of China looked me up online before they came. They knew my face from my Facebook profile, that I was a newlywed, and read reviews from other students about my character. New advisers should be made aware that the blogosphere makes for transparency...our actions echo far and wide. We can be true assets to our institutions and ambassadors more than we realize," she says.

And so any new tools continue to be in service to the traditionally prized qualities. To be sure, some of these qualities can be developed by emulating role models. But the newcomer will always need to bring certain character attributes to the job. Terry Creedon, international health insurance coordinator at Binghamton University, says, "In many ways the students and scholars taught me their needs, how they needed me to help them. As a newcomer, you have to bring time, an open heart, and a willingness to stretch yourself to meet those needs," she said.

Good training is invaluable for the individual adviser and, therefore, for the profession collectively. Skilled practitioners with a work ethic that focuses on top-notch customer service will be more satisfied with their work, have higher morale, and meet student and scholar needs more effectively. The offices that serve as their workplace will be more attractive to newcomers, likely experience lower turnover, and offer services with fewer risks of error and dissatisfaction. These international student and scholar services offices will be of greater value to their institutions, the field, and our country. **IE**

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