Navigating the Academic Developmental Maze:
New Possibilities for Mentoring International Graduate and Doctoral Students through the USA

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ABSTRACT

As an increased number of international students join College and University classrooms across the United States, their transition and acclimation to campuses has received attention over the past few years, particularly, in the areas of preparation and acculturation. This topic is important because faculty mentors can play a pivotal role in the professional development of international doctoral students. This article addresses these needs with a model which integrates adult learning and mentoring strategies to support international doctoral students. The model includes developing the skills which not only international graduates, but all graduates will benefit from in the 21st century. The significance of this model is its contribution to develop the valuable capabilities of proactive, problem solving, self-directed learners/academics able to self-reflect and navigate different cultural environments than their own. The discussion also provides future research recommendations.

Keywords: Doctoral, Graduate, International Students, Mentoring, Self-Directed Learning, Transformative Learning

1. INTRODUCTION

As if pursuing a doctoral degree was not challenging enough, imagine packing up your life, and relocating in another country to study in a foreign language, culture, and climate? How do people address the extra challenges and obstacles of international study in their pursuit of an academic degree? Where do they find the variety of resources they need to complement their hard work? These difficult questions have an infinite number of answers embedded in

the lives and aspirations of the 800,000 plus international students who reside in the USA (Ferdman, 2014).

While an American doctoral degree is held in high regard, aspiring students often do not have an accurate perception of the many challenges involved. To decrease confusion, frustration, and anxiety effective preparation programs may seek ways to provide support options. This article proposes a specific model for mentoring international doctoral students. The theory-based model focuses on cultivating skills which will provide international doctoral students success in academic positions once they graduate.

2. FACULTY SUCCESS REQUIRES MORE THAN TENURE GUIDELINES

Dr. Zhang was hired as an assistant professor at Metropolitan City University in Major Urban Area, Any State USA. She was very excited about the tenure track position because she had just finished her PhD from Major University, Other State, USA. She was quite pleased because the USA assistant professor salary was at least three times what her Chinese friends would earn back home in Beijing as professors. However, she did not realize the many differences that she would encounter as a USA professor.

By the end of the first semester, Dr. Zhang would have permanently returned home had she not met and befriended one very helpful colleague. She and Dr. Jones taught in the same program and consulted over coffee once a week. It seemed as if every week their conversations invariably turned to cultural expectations.

Through her time as an assistant professor, Zhang learned that the formal academic preparation of her PhD studies was insufficient to navigate the political, cultural and social dimensions of her new university appointment. One incident stood out as a "make or break" moment.

She had been preparing for class one evening when the phone rang. One of her colleagues from the department wanted to discuss the upcoming faculty vote about changes in the merit criteria. While she listened, Zhang wondered why this professor phoned her when he never spoke to her on campus. The next day at the meeting, her "phone call" colleague, kept glancing at her and smiling, as he did with several other professors. When the Chair of the meeting introduced the merit topic, he gave a strong plea for the faculty to support the change. The chair asked for discussion about the topic, but everyone just looked sideways at the sponsoring faculty; Zhang thought she heard feet shuffling as well. Finally, the fellow's junior research partner seconded the motion and the Chair requested a vote. While people watched one another, they each raised their hands slowly, one by one, around the tables. The tally determined the change was approved.

Later that week, Zhang asked Dr. Jones what the phone call and behavior at the meeting meant. He looked at her quizzically. After she described the situation, he chuckled, "That was political maneuvering in action. Our colleague has wanted those changes for years. This time he phoned everyone and "called-in a few favors" to accomplish his goal." Zhang clarified that the man was not part of her circle of friends or close colleagues. Jones told her that in the USA some people reach beyond their friends when they urgently want to accomplish their goals. He said that they expect to be able to find ways to manage people to get what they want. Zhang realized this instance was another example that in order to survive in USA universities,

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