

Understanding the Role of Cultural Competence in Peer Mentorship Programs for International Students: A Student Development Theory Perspective

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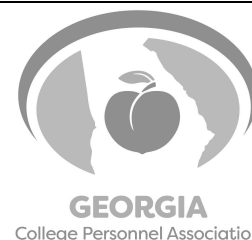
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International students often face challenges while pursuing higher education in a foreign country. These challenges can negatively impact their sense of belonging and community, resulting in social disconnection. Examining the role of culturally competent peer mentoring programs for international students can foster a sense of belonging among international students. Peer mentorship may provide international students with a supportive environment and community, helping them navigate university life. In contrast, student development theory can inform the design of programs and services that support international students in their transition to American higher education. These strategies can create a more inclusive and welcoming environment for international students, promoting their belonging, community, and success.

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Introduction

Pursuing higher education in a foreign country can be daunting for international students, who face several challenges that hinder their success (Özturgut & Murphy, 2009). While diversity on college campuses is critical, institutions must do more than showcase a diverse student body. International students' retention, progression, and graduation are crucial to achieving successful and sustainable outcomes (Carey et al., 2022). These factors are contingent upon addressing international students' challenges, such as culture shock, language barriers, financial instability, and adjusting to unfamiliar academic systems (Lee & Rice, 2007). Furthermore, international students may struggle with navigating the application process, financial aid, visa requirements, and finding suitable housing. As of 2017, over one million international students were studying in the United States. Higher education in the United States increasingly welcomes international students, as evidenced by the growing number of enrollments. This trend aligns with fostering a diverse campus community that can have a positive global impact (Kim et al., 2019).

The connection between cultural competence and student development theories (SDTs) is integral to addressing these challenges and promoting the success

of international students. Student development theories emphasize the critical role of the first year of college in ensuring students' success and persistence (Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1993). This is particularly true for international students who, in addition to learning and understanding a foreign culture, are transitioning to a new educational environment (Marginson et al., 2010). They may have a tough time adjusting to college, encountering academic, cultural, and social barriers not faced by their American peers (Lee & Rice, 2007). These barriers can be compounded by additional forms of discrimination and harassment that historically minoritized students can encounter living on campus (Harper et al., 2011; Harwood et al., 2012; Strayhorn & Mullins, 2012; Yao, 2016, 2018).

These negative experiences often result in academic problems, co-curricular adjustment, and transition issues, leading to feelings of isolation and marginalization (Lee & Rice, 2007; Wortman & Napoli, 1996; Yao, 2015). When international students feel marginalized or othered, they may disengage from the campus community, losing motivation and confidence to succeed academically (Hausmann et al., 2007; Hurtado et al., 2015; Mendoza-Denton et al., 2002). The concept of othering manifests when a dominant group takes on an “us –

versus – them” mentality, where those that are outside of that group are regarded as “other” and often excluded via marginalization (Allman, 2013; Luke, 2010; Johnson et al., 2004; Young, 1990).

Peer mentorship programs have emerged as a popular way to support international students' transition and success in higher education (Thomson & Esses, 2016). However, these programs' success largely depends on mentors' cultural competence and ability to understand and navigate cultural differences (Griffiths et al., 2018). This article examines the significance of cultural competence in peer mentorship programs for international students through the lens of student development theory. It offers practical considerations for building effective peer mentoring programs.

Background on peer mentorship programs for international students

Peer mentorship programs for international students have become increasingly popular over the last few decades as colleges and universities have recognized the merits of these programs and why they are needed to support international students (Thomson & Esses, 2016). Typically, these programs involve pairing international students with peers who have undergone the transition process and understand the academic and social culture of the institution (Murray,

2017). Peer mentors can serve as a great support system for international students, academically, socially, and professionally to help them feel more connected and comfortable with their institution (Heggins & Jackson, 2003).

There are numerous benefits of international student peer mentorship programs, which have been shown to improve academic performance, increase retention rates, and enhance social integration for international students (Thomson & Esses, 2016). Additionally, peer mentorship programs increase the sense of belonging among international students and reduce feelings of isolation and disconnection often experienced by these students (Murray, 2017). However, the success of these programs hinges on the quality of the mentor-mentee relationship. Peer mentors must possess cultural competency to effectively understand and empathize with the experiences and perspectives of their mentees (Kim et al., 2019). Having an awareness of cultural differences, the ability to understand other cultures, and the trajectory of student development contribute to fostering harmonious mentorship practices (Murray, 2017).

In recent years, there has been an increasing emphasis on the importance of cultural competence for peer mentoring

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programs and for every department of student and academic affairs in higher education (Frawley et al., 2020). Cultural competence requires interacting effectively with people from different cultures and understanding their unique perspectives, beliefs, and values (Punti & Dingel, 2021). For peer mentoring programs, mentors with cultural competence are better equipped to establish trust and support among their mentees, leading to better academic outcomes, positive social integration, and personal growth (Prieto-Flores et al., 2016).

Importance of cultural competence in peer mentorship programs

Cultural competence benefits both the mentor and the mentee in several ways (Kim et al., 2019). For mentors, cultural competence encourages the development of intercultural communication skills and empathy (Luke, 2010). By working with international students and learning from their unique experiences and perspectives, mentors can gain a deeper understanding of different cultures and broaden their worldviews (Heppner, 2017). This, in turn, can help mentors to become more effective leaders and better prepared to work in diverse settings. For mentees, cultural competence in mentors can facilitate the development of a sense of belonging and support (Griffiths et al., 2018). International

students may feel isolated and disconnected in a foreign country. Still, mentors who understand and respect their culture can create a safe and inclusive environment where students feel valued and supported (Heppner, 2017). This, in turn, can help mentees to thrive academically, socially, and professionally (Aldawsari et al., 2018).

Cultural Competence and Student Development Theory

Student development theory is essential for scholarly practitioners as it provides a framework for understanding how students evolve and change over time. Categories within student development theory include social identity, psychosocial identity, cognitive and epistemological development, moral development, and self-authorship (Jones & Abes, 2013). By understanding foundational theory, student affairs professionals can effectively support the holistic development of students and provide appropriate resources and interventions when necessary (Patton et al., 2016). Student development theory also helps professionals understand the unique circumstances and opportunities students face during their progression, enabling them to create inclusive spaces and provide services vital to student development (Jones & Abes, 2013). However, despite its many benefits, student development theory has

limitations that scholarly practitioners must address. For example, most theories are based on traditional Western cultural assumptions, and they do not always consider the experiences of diverse student communities, such as non-traditional students, adult learners, female students, and international students (Jones & Abes, 2013). Therefore, it is important to approach student development theory with caution and avoid generalizing it to all student groups.

Additionally, student development theory assumes a linear development of college students (Patton et al., 2016). This overall impression of student development must accurately reflect the complexities and variable logistics of all experiences. Some student development theories purely focus on individuals and do not consider the social construction that impacts students' experiences. It should also be noted that student development theories are not fixed (Jones & Abes, 2013). Different theories take different approaches, perspectives, and viewpoints among many professionals. Student development is more complex than one theory or group of ideas (Patton et al., 2016). However, it continues to guide the work of scholarly practitioners to facilitate positive retention, progression, and graduation of all students. Understanding and applying student development theory is crucial for educators and administrators to

create environments that support the growth and development of students both academically and personally. Furthermore, cultural competence should be emphasized to address the limitations of student development theory to promote inclusive practices that cater to the unique circumstances and opportunities faced by different student communities.

The Intersection of Cultural Competence and Student Development Theory

Astin's I-E-O Model

The I-E-O (Input-Environment-Output) Model, developed by Alexander Astin, is a widely accepted framework in higher education that explains student success through the interaction of inputs, the college environment, and outcomes (Yanto et al., 2011). According to Astin, student success depends on individual factors and the environment in which students learn and develop. Inputs represent student characteristics such as prior academic achievement, socioeconomic status, and cultural background (de Araujo, 2011). The environment component includes institutional factors such as academic rigor, quality of teaching, and availability of resources. Finally, the outcome component includes student outcomes such as

academic achievement, personal growth, and social development (Patton et al., 2016).

One key point where the interconnectedness between cultural competence and student development theories (SDTs) can be emphasized is in the context of international students, who face unique challenges adjusting to a new academic and cultural environment (de Araujo, 2011). Peer mentorship programs incorporating cultural competence can help international students navigate the inputs and environment components of the model and achieve positive outcomes. Culturally competent peer mentors can support international students in understanding the cultural expectations of the college environment and help them develop the necessary skills to succeed academically. They can provide information about extracurricular activities, clubs, and other social opportunities, which can help international students feel more comfortable and integrated into the campus community.

Peer mentors can also help international students overcome challenges related to socialization and cultural differences. They can facilitate cross-cultural communication and help students navigate misunderstandings that may arise due to cultural differences. Additionally, peer mentors can provide insights into American culture and norms, assisting international

students to better understand and navigate the social landscape of the institution. Incorporating cultural competence into peer mentorship programs can promote the success and integration of international students, leading to positive academic and personal outcomes. This approach aligns with student development theories that emphasize the importance of a supportive and inclusive environment for student growth. By prioritizing intentional involvement and recognizing the unique inputs of international students, American institutions can enhance their global reputation and have a lasting impact on student success.

Kuh & Love's (2000) Cultural Perspective on Student Departure

The rate of student departure is a significant issue in American higher education, and it is influenced by both academic and social integration into the university (Schaeper, 2020). Vincent Tinto's Theory of College Student Departure highlights the importance of these factors in student success and satisfaction (Tinto, 1975). Academic integration measures a student's success in academic pursuits and outcomes, while social integration refers to their sense of belonging and adjustment to new and diverse groups of people (Wortman & Napoli, 1996). Students who feel more connected to

their institutional communities are more likely to persevere, while those who feel disconnected are more likely to withdraw (Tinto, 1975). Other student development theories align with the principles of institutional involvement and connection. Namely, Astin's I-E-O (Input-Environment-Output) Model and Tinto's Theory of Student Integration support the role of involvement and connection affecting student success and satisfaction (Patton et al., 2016). Scholarly practitioners must evaluate all domains of student life, as they are mutually reinforcing. However, Tinto's perspective needs more empirical evidence and overlooks the role of institutional culture. George D. Kuh and Patrick G. Love expanded upon Tinto's theory to focus on how institutional culture shapes student experiences and impacts their decisions to persist or withdraw. Understanding an institution's culture is a product and process expressed through daily experiences, interactions, artifacts, traditions, and values (Patton et al., 2016). Institutional culture consistently evolves to impact students, faculty, staff, and the community.

Students' interpretations and lived experiences, rather than the institution's environment, facilitate the decision to withdraw (Tarmizi et al., 2019). The connection between a student's culture of origin, the cultures of immersion, and

sociocultural factors that mediate the relationships influence this decision (Kuh & Love, 2000). Using a cultural perspective to assess student departure acknowledges interaction. It allows institutions to promote positive interaction among their constituents by building community and cultivating a culture that prioritizes student success and engagement. The sociocultural perspective of student departure also acknowledges the decision as being shaped by cultural forces (Braxton et al., 2000).

Understanding international student departure through a cultural perspective allows scholarly practitioners to recognize and respect the cultural influence of an international student. If international students can witness cultural competency throughout the campus community, they are more likely to progress and graduate (Braxton et al., 2000). Understanding the cultural perspective notifies professionals of important issues international students face. For instance, there may be more pressure on international students to succeed academically than on their domestic counterparts (Braxton et al., 2014). International students also have different social expectations, which may exacerbate isolation and a lack of belonging (Yao, 2015). Other cultural factors, including familial expectations, political and economic climates of home countries, and financial

hardships, catalyze the withdrawal of international students from American higher education (Mamiseishvili, 2012). The cultural perspective will allow institutions to develop effective retention strategies for international students and improve strategies for preserving cultural integrity by developing support programs that promote inclusivity and reception of global student needs (Andrade, 2006b).

Moreover, culturally competent peer mentors can help international students navigate the academic landscape and provide them with insights into academic expectations, including course requirements, grading standards, and academic culture. By doing so, peer mentors can help international students feel more confident in their intellectual abilities, leading to greater academic integration and success. By understanding and applying Kuh and Love's (2000) Cultural Perspective on Student Departure and incorporating cultural competence in peer mentorship programs, institutions can improve the retention and success of international students. This approach benefits international students and contributes to the diversity and global perspectives of the campus community.

Application of Student Development Theory: Considerations for Developing Culturally Competent Peer Mentorship Programs

As universities become more diverse, it is crucial to ensure that all students, regardless of their cultural background, have access to resources that can help them succeed academically and socially. However, these programs must be designed with cultural sensitivity in mind, considering international students' unique experiences and perspectives. This requires exploring best practices for developing culturally competent peer mentorship programs that effectively support and empower international students. Student development theory informs these considerations by providing a framework for understanding how students from different cultural backgrounds may experience college life and what support they need to thrive. Additionally, student development theory offers resources and guidance to those creating peer mentorship programs, including strategies for promoting intercultural competence and creating inclusive learning environments that foster meaningful relationships between mentors and mentees.

Collaborate with International Student Organizations and Campus Resources

To effectively support international students, peer mentorship programs must be developed and implemented with an understanding of student development theory, specifically Kuh & Love's Cultural Perspective on Student Departure (2000), and Astin's Input-Environment-Output (I-E-O) Model. This multi-faceted approach recognizes the complexity of international students' challenges, incorporating established theories and models into the program's framework. Collaboration with international student organizations and campus resources provides valuable insight into this integrated approach (de Araujo, 2011). By working with these organizations, peer mentorship programs can identify potential mentors who have personal experiences and can relate to the challenges faced by international students, thereby supporting their developmental needs. Additionally, collaborating with these organizations can help promote the program, recruit participants, and ensure that it is culturally appropriate and tailored to the specific needs of international students. This partnership can also help the program stay current on the international student body's needs and challenges in the relevant social climate, thus supporting the goals of student development theory.

Astin's I-E-O Model is closely interwoven into this multi-faceted approach. Collaboration with international student organizations and other relevant campus resources is crucial to shaping the program's environment, as these partnerships help promote the program and recruit participants, fostering a supportive atmosphere for international students. Astin's model asserts that the environment is a critical factor in shaping student outcomes (output). The program's responsiveness to the needs and challenges of international students, informed by insights from international student organizations and campus resources, aligns with the model's emphasis on the role of the environment in influencing positive student outcomes.

Furthermore, Astin's model highlights the reciprocal nature of interactions between students and their environment. Collaborating with these organizations, and subsequently, involving international students in developing and implementing peer mentorship programs, allows for a dynamic interplay between students and their environment, promoting a sense of ownership and investment among international students, in line with the principles of student development theory. Their perspectives and experiences actively contribute to tailoring the program to meet their unique needs and challenges, further

enhancing its effectiveness in promoting their academic and personal growth.

International student offices and multicultural centers can be invaluable resources in developing and implementing culturally competent programs (Kim et al., 2019). These offices typically have staff members and students with experience working with international students and can offer insights into effective program design. By collaborating with these offices, peer mentorship programs can be tailored to meet the unique needs of international students, promote cultural competence, and foster a sense of belonging and support. This can be achieved through regular meetings to establish clear communication and define roles essential for ensuring the program meets its goals and objectives. The collaboration also provides access to funding and other resources that can support the program. By understanding and incorporating student development theory, peer mentorship programs for international students can be more effective and impactful, leading to positive outcomes for all participants involved.

Provide Ongoing Training and Professional Development for Mentors

Providing mentors with ongoing training and professional development opportunities is another critical component of developing

practical, culturally competent peer mentorship programs for international students (Kim et al., 2019). According to several student development theories, learning occurs inside and outside the classroom, and a student's development involves cognitive, social, emotional, and moral growth (Chickering & Reisser, 1994). Mentors who are well-trained and equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills are better equipped to effectively support and guide international students. These ongoing training opportunities should enhance mentors' cultural competencies, communication skills, leadership abilities, and cross-cultural understanding. This, in turn, fosters the growth and development of the mentor, aligning with student development theory's emphasis on holistic growth. One of the ways to provide ongoing training and professional development opportunities is through regular meetings and workshops. Regular meetings can help mentors stay updated with the latest trends and developments in the international student community, and workshops can provide specific skills or training on topics such as cultural awareness and sensitivity, conflict resolution, and effective communication. These meetings and workshops can also provide a forum for mentors to share their experiences,

exchange ideas, and discuss best practices for supporting international students.

Observing or shadowing mentorship initiatives are effective methods for training mentors. In these programs, new mentors can witness experienced mentors in action, mainly how they offer guidance and support to international students. By watching seasoned mentors, new mentors can learn valuable insights into effective mentorship techniques and develop their style. In addition, mentors require continuous resources and support, including access to supplementary training materials, books, and other resources that enhance their mentorship skills and knowledge. It is equally important to prioritize access to a support system for mentors, such as a mentorship coordinator or other staff member who can offer support and assistance when needed. Educators and administrators must remember that mentors require guidance as much as their mentees do. Observing or shadowing mentorship initiatives is connected to student development theory's concept of experiential learning. Experiential learning involves actively learning through experiences, reflection, and application. By observing experienced mentors in action, new mentors can engage in experiential learning by actively monitoring, reflecting on, and applying effective mentorship techniques in their mentorship practice. This

approach aligns with Kolb's (1984) experiential learning model, which emphasizes the importance of concrete experiences and reflective observation in the learning process.

Additionally, providing continuous resources and support for mentors, such as access to training materials and a mentorship coordinator, aligns with the student development theory's concept of supportive environments. These environments provide students with the necessary resources and support to facilitate their growth and development, which is crucial in mentorship programs. By prioritizing access to a support system for mentors, educators and administrators are creating a supportive environment for mentorship that can enhance the program's effectiveness and promote mentor and mentee growth and development.

Establishing assessment and feedback mechanisms can serve as a sturdy base for mentor retention and advancement (Barrera et al., 2010). These mechanisms can also foster the growth of the peer mentorship program since mentors and mentees can openly share their experiences, offering valuable insights into areas that may require improvement and highlighting successful mentorship strategies that can be replicated in the program's development process. According to student development

theory, students progress through a series of stages as they learn and develop; feedback is essential in facilitating that growth.

Incorporate Diversity and Inclusion into Program Goals and Objectives

Peer mentorship programs for international students can be viewed through student development theory, which emphasizes the importance of creating inclusive and supportive learning environments that cater to students' diverse backgrounds and experiences. To effectively incorporate cultural competence into these programs, it is crucial to prioritize diversity and inclusion in the program's goals and objectives (Kim, 2012). This approach can ensure that all participants' needs and expectations are met and foster a sense of belonging and community among mentees and mentors. By developing training materials and resources that focus on cultural competency and sensitivity and creating a safe and inclusive environment, program coordinators can help mentors enhance their cross-cultural communication and relationship-building skills. Moreover, establishing regular training sessions that facilitate open discussions on diversity, equity, and inclusion promotes cultural competence and aids mentors' professional development. Through these training sessions, mentors can learn to navigate cross-cultural conversations with

their mentees and better understand diverse cultural backgrounds. Incorporating cultural competence into international student peer mentorship programs can enhance mentors' and mentees' personal and academic development, promoting a holistic and well-rounded approach to education.

When developing peer mentorship programs for international students, the pairing process for mentors and mentees is a critical aspect to consider that is grounded in student development theory (Barrera et al., 2010). Peer mentorship programs can be designed to promote student learning and development, but effective mentoring relationships are built on positive alliances between mentors and mentees. To establish such positive collaborations, programs must consider all participants' cultural backgrounds and relevant factors such as language proficiency, cultural values, and religious practices to ensure that everyone involved feels comfortable and supported throughout the mentorship experience. This process of intentionally pairing mentors and mentees aligns with the principles of student development theory, emphasizing the importance of fostering a supportive environment where students can grow and learn. By integrating diversity and inclusion objectives into program goals, peer mentorship programs can effectively promote cultural competence, foster greater

appreciation and understanding of diverse cultures, and create a more inclusive and supportive environment for international students who participate in these programs.

Conclusion

Implementing culturally competent peer mentorship programs is increasingly crucial for international students' success and holistic wellness (Glass, 2012). These programs can provide international students with essential guidance, support, and a sense of community, promoting their academic and personal achievements. Nevertheless, the efficacy of such programs hinges on the cultural competence of students, mentors, and administrators. Cultural competence ensures peer mentors have the skills and knowledge to work

effectively with international students from diverse cultural backgrounds. Furthermore, incorporating student development theory into the design and implementation of mentoring programs can provide a comprehensive framework for addressing the specific needs of international students. Ultimately, the success of these programs depends on the dedication and hard work of institutional administrators, peer mentors, and international students. By prioritizing cultural competence informed by student development theory in the development of these peer mentoring programs, scholarly practitioners can ensure that international students receive the necessary guidance and support to excel academically and personally.

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