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Strategies to Enhance Student Success: A Discourse Analysis of Academic Advice in International Student Handbooks

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Abstract

As the population of international students continues to rise at U.S. colleges and universities, multiple academic obstacles pose barriers to success. Research on strategies of intervention has primarily included face-to-face interactions while an exploration of other assistance approaches is minimal in comparison. This study explored the role that mediated discourse plays in supporting international students with navigating paths through U.S. colleges and universities, by examining seven institutions' assistance handbooks. Discourse analysis allowed for an in-depth investigation of the academic advice available to international students concerning classroom culture, instructional styles, relationships with instructors, assessment, and academic honesty.

Keywords: International students; student handbooks; student success; discourse analysis

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An investigation into the experience of international students in the United States is an essential task to understand the cultural politics of U.S. higher education further. Studies on international student experiences are marginal in number in light of the rapidly increasing population of international students and contributions to American higher education in recent years (Bevis & Lucas, 2007). Davis (1997) explained that 457,984 international students attended U.S. institutions of higher education in the mid-1990s, which was a "…1,200 percent increase since 1954" (p. 67) (as cited in Peterson, Briggs, Dreasher, Horner, & Nelson, 1999). As of November 2011, this number increased to 723,277 (Open Doors, 2011). Peterson et al. (1999) asserted that the international student presence is becoming increasingly vital to an institution's economic development, reputation, and instruction of rarely studied subject material. Although colleges and universities recognize the advantages of having a more diverse community, there still remains a "need to articulate the benefits of international students to many publics" (p. 68).

One area of inquiry that lacks investigation is the role of campus resources available to assist international students in their educational endeavors–in particular, those resources that are not delivered through interpersonal interactions. In the current era when students look for assistance beyond regular meetings with peers or faculty, it is imperative to investigate the role of other types of resources available to international students. Using mediated discourse, this study explored the role that international student guides and handbooks perform in providing assistance to international students at U.S. institutions of higher education.

By further exploring the discourse within such handbooks, this study will broaden an understanding of assistance strategies that are offered by institutions of higher education to help international students adjust to U.S. college and university life. It will also help answer the following research question: What experiences do U.S. colleges and universities wish international students to have as members of the U.S. culture of higher education?

Literature Review

Barriers to International Student Success

As the interest in attracting more students outside the United States has steadily increased, so has attention toward investigating the experiences that international students have in their educational and cultural interactions while away from their home countries. Much of the literature over the past thirty years has focused heavily on topics concerning hurdles that international students face while attending schools in the United States (e.g. Hanassab & Tidwell, 2002; Owie, 1982; Schram & Lauver, 1988). Pedersen (1991) claimed that numerous international students experience unique difficulties in transitioning to the college or university setting. The need for resources of assistance is essential when considering the research findings that education in the United States can be a difficult transition because of culture shock or adjustment difficulties (Olaniran, 1996; Zhao, Kuh, & Carini, 2005), fear of failure (Hanassab & Tidwell, 2002; Pedersen, 1991), and isolation (Zhao, Kuh, & Carini, 2005; Olaniran, 1996; Owie, 1982; Mori, 2000; Pedersen, 1991). The implications of these issues may lead to a negative perception of U.S. higher education and could hinder a student's ability to succeed.

An international student's journey will vary according to age (Andrade, 2006; Mori, 2000), gender (Hanassab & Tidwell, 2002; Manese, Sedlaceck, & Leong, 1988), and national background (Trice, 2004; Sodowsky & Placke, 1992), illustrating that the international student path is an individualized journey that holds unique obstacles and advantages for each student.

College and University Intervention Strategies

Two of the most successful intervention strategies that have been used by colleges and universities to assist this population include: (a) the fostering of community building amongst international students, and (b) building integration with native students and faculty in the larger college and university community. Al-Sharideh and Goe (1998) noted that in the wake of numerous problems that international students can face, participation in "ethnic communities" can allow students to maintain a connection to their native cultures while working to integrate into the U.S. higher education community. However, in their conclusions, the authors also articulate that while solely participating in a community comprised of students from similar backgrounds increases self-esteem, such a strategy does not necessarily contribute to stronger relationships between international and native U.S. students. When international students of similar backgrounds participate in communities comprised of individuals who share their nationality, students will likely experience less loneliness. However, "one recognizes that language and cultural barriers, as well as discrimination, are not easily removed" (Trice, 2004, p. 685). Regardless of the disadvantages associated with either strategy, Al-Sharideh & Goe (1998) provide a strong justification that the benefits of participating in a social community while away from one's home country holds significant benefits and overwhelmingly makes the transitions to U.S. colleges and universities a smoother process.

Colleges and universities have attempted to make socialization more integrated in hopes of providing international visitors with the most meaningful higher education experience possible.

Another development in recent years includes peer programs that are intended to join international and U.S. students together and to foster socialization (Abe, Talbot, & Geelhoed, 1998). These programs, which have been praised by other studies (e.g., Westwood & Barker, 1990; Quintrell & Westwood, 1994), can support international students in academic achievement and involvement in campus life. The broader research on peer-assistance programs makes general assertions that such intervention strategies are undoubtedly helpful. However, based upon the compelling claims that these programs have achieved numerous successes, strategies that include interactive components between international students and U.S. peers demonstrate the potential to construct successful means of assistance. Exploring how strategies that are not interactive shape the international student experience is necessary to create a more comprehensive understanding of the resources available to aid in student success.

Methods

It is difficult to clarify the definition of discourse analysis concretely because the written and spoken forms of communication blend together when researchers use these phenomena for study (Alba-Juez, 2009; Brown & Yule, 1983). Traditionally, the process of discourse analysis included qualitatively written or transcribed works to conclude how language functions (Alba Juez, 2009). However, discourse analysis has evolved as a methodology by focusing on the relationship between both written and spoken communication and the context of the discourse (De Saussure, 2007). De Saussure also noted that discourse analysis is a broad methodology that can be practiced in differing ways and takes on different forms in various academic disciplines.

Discourse analysis was used in this study to examine a series of web assistance guides from colleges and universities designed to help international students navigate the higher education system in the United States. The author categorized academic advice available in guides into thematic groups to illustrate the many facets of students' experiences to produce holistic meanings. Because the process of discourse analysis takes varying forms, in this study the researcher used open coding and categorization, an approach that places ideas in larger theoretical groups (Pandit, 1996). It is common for colleges and universities to have institution-sponsored web pages intended to help international students navigate a course through their new educational experiences. Assistance guides and handbooks are readily available to students on such web-pages. The author used such sources for this study.

The guides selected for this study were chosen based on the following criteria: (a) broad representation of student populations, (b) accessibility of guides to prospective and current students, and (c) the inclusion of academic advice. With regards to representative student populations, guidebooks were collected from colleges and universities made up of an international student body of 3.2%-11% of the total student population. A decision not to include advice from schools that had a uniquely high percentage of international students was made so as to understand the transitional challenges for more conventional campuses. The selection also excluded colleges and universities that did not have international student resource centers or assistance-based resources on the web, since the study did not involve travel to these institutions. Guidebooks were selected that addressed the international student population as a singular audience instead of distinguishing between students from different regions or countries.

Second, the availability and accessibility of the materials was important to the selection process. Schools that did not have international student handbooks available on their websites as singular and downloadable documents were excluded because current and prospective students would likely not have exposure to transitional advice. Finally, handbooks were selected for inclusion because they included separate sections directly addressing transitions to the U.S.

academic environment rather than only addressing issues outside the context of the classroom (e.g., finances, immigration, etc.).

Search engines were used to identify college and university international student center homepages to gain access to the handbooks included in this study. Given the selection criteria, seven handbooks were selected from both private and public institutions that have web-based documents that offer academic advice. Two-year institutions were not included in this study because the academic experience with peers and faculty differs significantly from four-year colleges and universities. Based on the quantity and categories of information available, the author chose to eliminate nineteen handbooks from this study which either did not have multiple categories of academic advice for international students or were not easily accessible to a student in a single published document.

Analyzing mediated discourse in handbooks that are readily available on college and university webpages is a justified approach to this study because these documents are widely available and the likelihood of a student encountering these documents online in the contemporary era would be higher than gaining access to them in a printed form. Also, the accessibility of the documents enables both current and future students to encounter these guides.

The author chose to analyze the web-based discourse of seven institutions of higher education to understand a comprehensive view of how universities and colleges in the United States advise and guide new international students toward success. Handbooks represent various regions of the northeastern, midwestern, and southeastern U.S., sizes, and types (public and private) of colleges and universities. These institutions include: The University of Alabama, Chatham University, The University of Maine at Fort Kent, The University of North Carolina at Greensboro, The University of Minnesota, Denison University, and Macalester College. Although the final count includes seven handbooks, more than 300 pages of content are included for analysis in this study.

Research Findings

In analyzing the discourse contained in international student handbooks, it became evident that multiple forms of advice abound. Suggestions were offered for all students of various backgrounds, yet were uniquely for those who are new to the U.S. education culture. Handbooks emphasized that the U.S. education culture is significantly different from the educational systems that international students have experienced in their home countries. Handbooks offered advice concerning the unique nuances of the U.S. culture of higher education. At times advice was offered specific to the culture of a school, while in other instances statements were adapted from textbooks or from another college or university's handbook. In most cases, these handbooks acknowledged their borrowing of another's work. In some cases however, there were questionable instances of not acknowledging the origin of all sources.

Regardless of origin, the handbooks addressed several issues concerning the culture of academics in the United States. The specific sub-categories that emerged included: Classroom culture, instructional styles, relationships with instructors, assessment, and academic honesty.

U.S. Classroom Culture

Most handbooks addressed the interesting nuances of the U.S. academic structure of higher education and summarized a series of unique characteristics intended to help non-native students prepare for their educational experiences away from home. These statements attempted to expose readers to the idea that there are a variety of differences between the education system in the United States and other nations. Examples included:

> [P]rofessors will often provide an outline of the course, known as a syllabus. This guide is designed to help you understand the goals, format, and grading system of the course. If you have questions about the syllabus, what the course will cover, or the evaluation system in the class, ask the instructor. (University of Alabama, 2007, p. 27)

> "Normal" classroom behavior in another country might include students' absolute silence and obedience, whereas in the U.S., students are expected to comment, ask questions, and even challenge or contradict the professor's lecture. (Chatham University, 2011, p. 23)

To succeed in it [the U.S. academic system], you will need to learn how it is organized and how it works. (Macalester College, 2011, p. 57; University of Maine at Fort Kent, 2011, p.22)

These statements represented a rhetorical strategy that generalizes U.S. education styles and places less emphasis on acknowledgment of the differences across disciplines and instructional styles. One handbook adapted a large summary of short statements developed by faculty members Paige & Smith (1988) and revised by Stuck (1993) to more thoroughly summarize the diverse characteristics of academics in the United States.

> The U.S. cultural values listed in the previous section shape the academic environment in the following ways: 1. Active classroom participation is expected. 2. Time pressure is high - often there are many small assignments due each week - and time management is an important skill to develop. 3. Critical thinking must be developed. 4. Independent thinking is highly valued. 5. Presenting ideas concisely in class is expected. 6. Assignments (reading, writing, homework, tests) are numerous. (University of Minnesota, 2011, p. 24)

This short list offered by the University of Minnesota (2011) listed some components of Western education to expose new students to the system to a variety of concepts and ideas that are comparatively different from other nations. This discourse contained several concepts that many college and university handbooks list to help international students adjust to U.S. higher education culture.

Instructional Style

Beyond briefing international students about the characteristics of U.S. higher education, international student handbooks further specified strategies for adapting to these differences. An important aspect discussed in several handbooks concerned the structure of U.S. academic courses. Handbooks made several generalizations concerning the way that U.S. instructors may approach the dynamics of teaching. In almost all instances, international student handbooks were invested in acknowledging that the U.S. college classroom is often more relaxed than others and not solely grounded in the lecture method of instructing. Because this characteristic is acknowledged, handbooks also advised international students regarding how to adapt to unfamiliar styles of pedagogy.

> University classes are set up on lecture or interactive formats, but most use a combination of the two. The lecture format stresses learning and applying information, whereas the interactive format stresses communication and adapting information to changing contexts…You must actively participate in your education; it will not be given to you. (UA, 2007, p. 28)

> Some instructors prefer a more formal style of lecture with a possible question and answer period at the end; others prefer a more conversational style and encourage interaction throughout the class…When expressing your views in class, be ready to defend your ideas. (CU, 2011, p. 23) Source: *Beyond Language: Cross Cultural Communication*, Levine, Deena R. and Adelman, Mara B., Prentice Hall, 1993. (p. 24)

> When the class is too large to permit questions and discussion, or if for some reason you do not have the opportunity to raise questions, you may see your teacher privately during his/her office hours or make an appointment for another convenient hour, to discuss any questions you may have. (MC, 2011, p. 55)

Handbooks from both large public and small private institutions acknowledged that international students should do more than passively listen in a course. Regardless of class size, the advice remained the same: in order to succeed in the U.S. college or university, a student must take on an active role in his or her own education both inside and outside a classroom. With regards to the statements above, the first acknowledged that most classrooms will require such participation, while the two statements that followed emphasized the importance of becoming actively self-involved in the educational process. Rather than ask students to adapt to each classroom, handbooks emphasized the need for students to be active members of their courses.

Relationships with Instructors

Beyond describing how teachers will teach, handbooks also stressed the importance of taking initiative to build meaningful relationships with faculty. Also, because some handbooks were quick to acknowledge that the student/teacher relationship may be separated by a large power differential in other nations, handbooks highlighted that in the U.S., students and teachers have closer interactions. For example:

> Equality is a value in the U.S., and although students are subordinate to professors in the U.S., it may not be readily apparent… Some instructors are very relaxed in their behavior - walking around the classroom, sitting next to the students, drinking coffee, or sitting on the table are common manifestations of this egalitarian American attitude. (CU, 2011, p. 23; *Beyond Language: Cross Cultural Communication*, Levine, Deena R. and Adelman, Mara B., Prentice Hall, 1993.)

> The First Year Office will assign an academic advisor to you based on your interests. Your advisor will assist you with course selection, registration and guidance on academic issues. Feel free to drop in and meet your advisor as frequently as you wish. (Denison University, 2011, p. 10)

> Do you call a professor by a title such as "Professor Brown," or do you call her by first name, "Judith," as you may hear other students do?... It is best when dealing with professors and TAs to err on the side of politeness and use their titles — Professor, Doctor, Mr., or Ms. (UM, 2011, p. 11) Adapted from *American Ways* by Gary Althen, University of Iowa. (p. 12)

Handbooks highlighted the relevance of having friendly interactions with instructors outside of class and acknowledged that such friendly interactions must be negotiated with a respect for the instructor in the classroom. Furthermore, the generalization that U.S. teachers tend to be less formal with students is juxtaposed against a series of statements which acknowledge the need to address teachers with more formal language. Regardless of the multiple complexities which were included in handbooks to help international students understand the nature of relationships with

instructors, handbooks pointed out that there are several unique aspects which may characterize such relationships in the United States.

Assessment

Several handbooks described various ways that learning is assessed and evaluated in the U.S. classroom, namely: participation and testing.

Participation. Handbooks' descriptions elucidated that the expectations of learning in the classroom and relationship with instructors necessitate students to be active participants in their education as this is a crucial part of assessment and evaluation. Several examples of statements noted the relevance of actively participating in the U.S. classroom:

> Passively receiving information and repeating it is not good enough…[Y]our active participation in the learning process will greatly enhance your education. Once again, when teachers see you are putting forth an effort, they are much more likely to help you out if you get behind in their classes. (UA, 2007, p. 28)

> Sit in the front of the class. It will help you focus on the lecture, and it sends a non-verbal message to the instructor that you are motivated and interested in the class. (CU, 2011, p. 25) (Adapted from: University of *Iowa's Handbook for Foreign Students and Scholars* 1997-1998, pgs. 84 -85. (p. 25)

> Class attendance policies are up to the instructor's discretion, but never assume a lack of policy means it is acceptable to skip class. Consistent class attendance and participation are key factors in succeeding on the college level. (DU, 2011, p. 7)

One particular justification for this advice focused on being an active student who regularly attends class and is visible is that the behavior will likely result in instructors who will like the student more. Although not directly stated, such advice concluded that an instructor's liking toward a student is an essential part of the evaluation process.

Testing. The concept of large tests was acknowledged in sections which concerned assessment. Handbooks pointed out that classes may have more tests than one final exam and that these assessments could be constructed in various ways. Two examples included:

> A typical U.S. course will have three tests (including a mid-term and final) and at least one paper. This can be good and bad; it gives you more chances at increasing your grade in the class. However, it also means that you may have more day-to-day studying for your classes. (University of North Carolina-Greensboro, 2011, p. 7)
> Almost every class has a "final examination" at the end of each semester. These tests can be cumulative, which means they cover material from the entire course, or non-cumulative, which means they only cover material since the previous test. (UA, 2007, p. 32)

> You are usually given a deadline by which to complete a take-home exam outside of the classroom. Often, you can use your books and notes, but you cannot get help from other people. (MC, 2011, p. 55)

The notion of testing was described in various ways by several college and university handbooks. All of the guides included in this analysis were concerned with exposing students who were new to the U.S. culture of higher education to testing that may differ significantly from other approaches of

assessment that rely solely on one exam at the end of a course. Also, the description of these statements showed an interest in not only describing the various types of exams, but also acknowledging that any test should be taken seriously. To avoid problems such as cheating, one guide emphasized that students could not work with each other on take home exams. Though this may not be true for every classroom, the guide encouraged it.

Academic Honesty

Advice about academic honesty was commonplace in student handbooks. Because violations of academic honesty policies could lead to serious repercussions (including expulsion), handbooks included detailed descriptions of the types of academic dishonesty so as to expose readers to the importance and complexity of this aspect of U.S. higher education.

> Academic standards and practices are influenced by culture. What is considered appropriate academic behavior in your home country might be different from what is appropriate in the United States. Therefore, it is important that you understand U.S. standards and practices. Not meeting these standards can result in charges of academic dishonesty and possible expulsion. (UM, 2011, p. 24; MC, 2011, p. 56)

This statement, used in two handbooks but created by the University of Minnesota (2011), provided a very detailed description to expose students to the potential consequences of academic dishonesty. Furthermore, these handbooks highlighted that such policies are grounded in a U.S. culture which privileges individualism rather than collective accomplishment. The handbooks not only gave comprehensive descriptions of these concepts, but also offered advice about avoiding plagiarism.

> Not all cultures consider it cheating to use someone else's writings or ideas—but this is a very serious form of cheating in the U.S. Plagiarism is the practice of copying from a publication, a lecture, or web site without proper acknowledgment of the source of that information…Talk with your instructors about what constitutes plagiarism. Request advice on the preferred method(s) of citation. If you are still unclear on what constitutes plagiarism, visit the Writing Center… (DU, 2011, p. 10)

> In general, Americans prize independence and individual effort. In [the] academic world they value independent thought. The most serious offense in the academic world is that of representing another person's work as one's own…Plagiarizing the work of another scholar can result in expulsion from the university. (UMFK, 2011, p. 29)

Handbooks advised that students must always consult with faculty or a research guide when writing to avoid plagiarism. Although such policies concerning plagiarism are stressed for all college/university students, international student guides were careful to advise students about these policies knowing that cultural differences and ignorance of U.S. approaches to plagiarism are not acceptable reasons for committing such offenses.

Discussion

With regards to the various categories of academic advice available in international student handbooks, all showed a strong interest in helping international students adapt to the culture of higher education in the United States. Many of the statements advised students on what to do in order to succeed were grounded in acknowledging that various elements of the U.S. higher education system differ significantly from other cultures. Furthermore, the thematic analysis in several categories demonstrated a crucial message concerning U.S. cultural values. Individualism is

pervasive in both U.S. culture and education and promotes the belief that it is the student's responsibility to succeed in the U.S-American classroom. This individualism places the responsibility on students to take control of their situations in a variety of regards and responds to the previously reviewed literature regarding problems that may hinder reaching success. The promotion of individualism attempted to integrate international students into a higher education community pervaded by the promotion of personal responsibility.

The advice across these handbooks also addressed many of the areas that previous scholarship has argued are unique obstacles for international students in colleges and universities. Handbooks acted as another form of an intervention strategy for success because these guides included comprehensive suggestions for dealing with diverse issues both inside and outside the college or university classroom. Several suggestions were primarily pragmatic guides to help students adapt to U.S. culture while others prompted students to think more broadly about the philosophical grounding of higher education in the United States. Advice attempted to help international students efficiently navigate through immediate barriers and demonstrated a desire for students to have an educational experience in which they are not overwhelmed by larger social, political, and economic concerns. Handbooks guided international students to have meaningful and positive educational experiences by subliminally addressing questions related to the purposes of a U.S. education and through attempts to focus on pragmatic concerns rather than larger philosophical ones.

Conclusions

The handbooks used for the critical discourse analysis in this study made for a limited set of conclusions due to type and quantity. First, handbooks reflected the cultural value of individualism not solely through content but also through the dissemination of the documents by having placed large components in a text that a student is expected to read and comprehend. Second, these handbooks suggested generalities of how students should think about the American classroom while providing specific directives. Finally, handbooks solely addressed categories of information that principally concerned various face-to-face contexts and did not reflect the evolving delivery of hybrid and fully web-based course instruction.

Having chosen seven documents for analysis, the author aimed to understand what a select few handbooks reveal about the kind of experiences that colleges and universities want international students to have. These handbooks represented public and private colleges and universities - both large and small - from different areas of the country. Guides provided a sample of what some institutions deem necessary for international students to know before embarking on their educational journeys. However, while many of these handbooks shared opinions and ideas, they also generalized the classroom experiences of students across course levels and disciplines. Advice was, nevertheless, directed toward helping students understand that communicating with faculty was paramount to success, in addition to the general recommendations to take the initiative to maintain personal responsibility in decision-making.

This study revealed a current need to investigate topics related to international students to better understand the role of mediated discourse rather than interpersonal interaction with students and faculty. While it is important to interview and directly study international students to continue to understand their perceptions to barriers in their journeys, scholars must also study other forms of discourse that impact the international student. More research concerning educators' pedagogical strategies and institutions' approaches to intervention will help complete the puzzle for understanding international student experiences - especially as the need to build a stronger college or university community is necessary with a rise in applications and the desire for higher education institutions to support student success.

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