

Student-Advisor Relationships of International Doctoral Students

in a Nursing Program

by

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Abstract

This small-scale exploratory study uses face-to-face interviews to investigate the academic success and student-advisor relationship of the international doctoral students in a Nursing doctoral program in the United States. The most remarkable finding is the observation of the cut-off point in the relationships among English language proficiency, academic success, and student-advisor relationship. This study finds that advisors' influence outweighs the importance of student's language proficiency. Future research should include longitudinal and multi-site studies to more thoroughly assess the success of international doctoral students in nursing programs.

Keywords: Nursing, Advisor, International Students

Having a supportive relationship with an advisor is critically important during doctoral study (Shelton, 2003); however, international students have been given nearly no attention in the literature to understanding how effects of student-advisor interactions vary according to students' characteristics (Terenzini and Pascarella, 1991) and institutional contexts. Many previous studies have showed that cultural and English language barriers have impact on the forming of student-advisor relationships that go beyond academics; however, most studies were done from the perspective of cross-cultural understanding (i.e., McKean, 1994). Very little studies were done to reduce the attrition of international students and to examine their overseas learning experience (Terenzini and Pascarella, 1991). Forming student-advisor relationship is the "nature and dynamics of the collegiate experience" (Terenzini & Pascarella, 1991, p. 90) for international students. This study attempts to examine the experience of international doctoral students in overcoming language and cultural barriers to become full-fledged members of a nursing academic community. I also seek to understand how these students initiate meaningful interactions with faculty.

Method

Setting

This study was conducted at a large research university--one of the top ten US institutions hosting international students (Institute of International Education, 2011).

The nursing doctoral program has approximately 75 students, ages range from the early 20s to early 60s. The majority of students study full-time and 22% are internationals. The selective admission process requires international doctoral students to achieve a high academic standard and ELP. Though these students have attained satisfactory Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) scores, they still may be asked to complete a telephone or face-to-face interview at the selected site.

Participants

The university typically enrolls four doctoral students from Taiwan, one of the heavily represented international doctoral student groups within the program. The participants were single female, pre-candidates, who had earned master's degree in nursing in the US. They were in their late 20s and early 30s; one specialized in gerontology (identified as Ann), one in occupational health (identified as Betty) and two in woman's health (identified as Cherry and Dina). Pseudonyms were given for all participants in the interest of confidentiality. Ann, Betty, and Dina had a few years of full-time working experience as clinical nurses in Taiwan, and Cherry had no working experience.

Data Collection

Data were collected from institutional or national records. Semi-structured, open-ended and face-to-face interviews were conducted following approval of an

institutional review board and signed consent from participants. Interviews were audio-taped to capture the richness and accuracy of data, and the data were transcribed and reviewed for each participant during the process of data collection.

A wide variety of documents were reviewed, including national statistical reports such as *Open Doors 2011*, and institutional statistical reports such as English skills requirements, English reevaluation results, the departmental admission package, departmental booklets, enrollment reports, official websites for doctoral students, doctoral course guides, and participants' self provided curriculum vitae, academic performance and assistantships. Most documents were reviewed before the first interview took place, and then reviewed again during the data triangulation process.

Data Analysis

The interview data were coded, analyzed, and categorized, and emergent themes were identified. These documents were analyzed by content analysis procedures, and interview data were examined using interpretive analysis in order to look for patterns or constructs that could provide insights to this research. Triangulation was performed by cross-examining the above data sources in the effort to look for factors that could describe and explain how ELP affects international doctoral students' learning experience and what the respondents do to overcome their difficulties in forming a meaningful relationship with their advisors.

Respondents' oral skills were collected from the tape recorded interviews and used as measurements of ELP. Oral skills are used on daily basis and are the most critical communicative skills in many activities in academic settings. A validated oral proficiency scale was adopted to evaluate the respondents' ELP. This scale was developed and has been used for years at the English Language Institute at a US research university to assess non-Anglophone teaching assistants' oral skills and is a reliable scale. This five-point-scale uses the controls of linguistic repertoire, speech production, instructional context awareness and verbal and non verbal interactive communication techniques as assessment criteria.

Results

Assessment of Respondents' ELP

Respondents' oral ELP ranged between 3- and 4- on the Teaching Assistants Rating Scale, suggesting that even the most proficient one would probably not qualify for a teaching assistantship in a Liberal Arts College. The nursing faculty is not the major source of English language help for international students; for one thing, the nursing faculty typically does not usually inform students if they need to seek help with English; for another, the faculty typically does not assume the responsibility of editing students' English. Even in the cases of students who are clearly weaker in English, faculty infrequently advise those students to get professional help (i.e.,

English as Second Language courses) from the University.

Formal Supportive Practice

The nursing doctoral program has two parallel ways of advising students: the program director and advisors. A new administrative position was created to oversee the doctoral program. A foreign-born faculty member was appointed to serve in the directorship about three years ago, and she was chosen perhaps for her particular background, which international students can relate to themselves. Ann thinks that the director is the treasure of department, and stated, “The best point for my [program] is that the director is international...she knows the difficulties for international students and the cultural norms [of] Americans. She...shows us how to communicate with American faculty and students.”

Ann’s view is generally accepted among the Taiwanese cohorts; however, Dina does not feel the creation of new directorship has changed anything for international students. She has been working with an advisor for five years, and the relationship is warm and supportive. The respondents feel comfortable talking about personal problems with advisors, as well as the director of doctoral studies in the program. Dina stated “[the advisor] makes me feel that she will help me if I am in trouble...She cares about every student of hers...she makes me feel comfortable to talk about everything, including personal and familial issues...She is just like a second mom.”

Overall, the student-advisor relationship is intimate in nursing program, and the faculty act more like mentors than instructors or research directors.

Limitations

A few limitations still exist in this study, but are simply a product of the particular design. First, the findings will be most useful for nursing doctoral programs. Second, the findings should be used with caution for international students from non-Chinese speaking countries. Third, the ability to generalize the findings of this study will require additional study beyond the current study.

Conclusion

ELP was shown to have weak influences on student-advisor interactions in nursing. Student-advisors' social interactions are frequent and supportive, and advisors tend to foster nurturing relationships with doctoral students regardless of their ELP. The findings may suggest that faculty members offer more support to international students, show more tolerance for various cultural and language barriers, and are willing to maintain meaningful relationships with students despite their students' cultural and language barriers. For such a large institution, these kinds of efforts are quite unusual. *Advisors' influence* and *students' willingness to learn* serve as the most reliable predictors of international doctoral students' success. Particularly, advisors' influence outweighs the importance of students' ELP in achieving academic

success. The most successful students in this study are those whose advisors have positive influences on them, and students simultaneously spend large amounts of time and effort endeavoring to overcome their barriers.

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