Addressing the Intercultural in Multicultural

Steven Sweat, Programming and First Year Experience Coordinator, International Student Services, The University of Kansas

One of the values that makes residence life so wonderful is our commitment to being open, accepting, and welcoming to all people. Over the past decade, I have been inspired, motivated, and made a better person by the sincere commitment to multiculturalism demonstrated by the many residence life departments I have worked for. This summer, I transitioned out of my career in housing and into a new role in the office of International Student Services. As a natural outflow of this transition, I have found my focus shifting away from residents and toward international students, which has caused me to reflect on ways that I could have better supported the international students that lived in my residence halls. In this article, I would like to explore a few of these realizations that I wish I had come to earlier in my career and give a few simple suggestions for enhancing service to our international students from a residence life standpoint. After that, I will pose some questions and explore why they must be asked if we truly desire to serve our international students. As a new professional in the world of International Education, I do not have all of the answers, but I hope that my reflection will inspire others to consider ways to provide enhanced service to this integral portion of a vibrant campus.

Reflections Based on What I Wish I Had Done

- Think Specifically About International Students
The concept is simple enough, but I am embarrassed to say that in the midst of the unpredictability of student concerns, facility issues, staff questions, and administrative deadlines, that I scarcely stopped to take this simple step of considering the international students in my area. Hopefully, many of you were better able to navigate this balance, but I know of too many examples where international students feel forgotten or overlooked. Shame on us if the reason they feel this way is that we have, indeed, overlooked or forgotten them. Furthermore, I found it much easier to focus on my international students when I worked in the international residence hall than when I worked in a complex with only had a handful of international residents in my entire area. The challenge, then, is for all of us to make this a priority.

Suggestion: This suggestion is less tangibly practical than the three that follow, but it is a prerequisite to each of them. It is essential in any and all efforts toward better supporting our international students: We must make it a priority to set aside time to slow down and think specifically about our international students. Beyond that, we ought to learn more about international student experiences at our institution and in our residential communities (i.e. ask questions, read articles, speak to others). It may feel like there is not enough time to take these extra steps of intentionality, but if we continue to view the necessary work of supporting our students as “extra,” instead of a vital part of everything that we do, then how are we fulfilling our promise to the students that we recruited to our institution and into our residential spaces?

- Take Advantage of Staff Training
RA training is one of the most intensive and holistically developmental experiences I went through as an undergraduate student. I know that fitting the ever-increasing supply of topics and sessions into a palatable training schedule is a constant challenge. But, if we want to make a priority of supporting our international students, this is one that cannot be missed. Training on privilege and oppression, diversity, multiculturalism, and social justice are absolutely critical, but they do not suffice as training on how to support international students unless direct discussion about international students is included. How can we expect RAs and even professional staff members to perform at high competency levels when working with their international students if we fail to train on intercultural communication and the extra challenges that international students face?

Suggestion: Train staff members at all levels about intercultural communication. Learn about the experience of international students and talk about strategies to support them. Take advantage of the experts that you have on campus by collaborating with other faculty or staff. You may have to get creative about how to approach this (in-service staff training days, individual staff meetings, online modules, etc.). The logistics are yours to explore, but the direct, intentional
training must occur if we truly want our international students to feel supported in the ways that they need to be.

- **Create Frameworks and Initiatives That Begin with Students in Mind**

Student housing is a complex business with as many stakeholders as there are eyes on our buildings. Surely the student experience is not the only signpost from which we ought to orient our priorities. If, however, we refuse to change course when student need calls us in another direction, how are we to expect students to be satisfied with their on-campus living experience? As our communities become more global, it is our responsibility to adapt to meet the increasingly complicated needs of all of our students. Why, then, would we expect our procedures and practices to remain static?

**Suggestion:** Let the needs of your students inform the direction of initiatives, timelines, and frameworks. Take some time to look at your mission statement. This should theoretically drive everything that we do. Do we include international students in the way we operationalize this mission? For example, when international students arrive in the United States to check into our residence halls, how are we supporting them? Do we limit our support of these students to times when our buildings are officially open? Our students experience life as a seamless, continuous process, and we must be aware of the impact that this has on our international students. The answer cannot always be that residence life needs to change to solve the problem, but if we fail to consider creative ways to overcome these obstacles, we are only pushing away residents who are likely to benefit the most from living on campus. Here are a few areas that I would encourage further consideration on whether or not your departmental practices are inclusive of the needs of international students:

- Arrivals, Departures, and Breaks
- Living Situations (roommates and roommate agreements, floor dynamics, facilities)
- Staff Development and Training
- Mental Health Concerns and Referrals
- Strategies for Campus Involvement

**Ask Colleagues and Peer Institutions for Ideas**

Many schools are doing wonderful things to collaborate and work toward campus internationalization. Let us take the initiative to learn about the efforts that are happening in other offices on our own campus and at other campuses nearby.

**Suggestion:** Ask campus partners and colleagues at other institutions what they are doing. Work with your staff team and campus partners to brainstorm ways to operationalize similar strategies in your department. Take advantage of the wonderful training opportunities available from professional organizations or workshops available on your own campus.

**Questions to Consider**

Now that we have explored some of the realizations that I wish I had come to sooner in my career, let us consider some questions that challenge the way we operate and provide opportunity to identify areas where we can take action to further support our international students.

- What have I done to expand my understanding of international students’ experiences?

I thought that from my years of working with international students on a personal and professional level that I had a pretty good sense of their experiences in the residence halls. The reality, however, is that unless I commit to expanding my understanding of other peoples’ experiences, I snap back to my own framework pretty quickly. We must ask this question to remind ourselves of the different experiences, perspectives, and priorities of students from cultures different than our own.

- What have we done to seek the input and perspective of our international students?

When we fail to seek input from our international students, we assume upon them our own understanding of their experience, including their preferences, needs, challenges, and concerns. We must ask this question to provide a solid foundation from which to base our decisions and actions.

- Have we considered the international student experience in the way that we have developed this service/program/initiative? What can we do to make this more inviting for an international student?

You may not have the time, resources, or motivation to revamp the entire infrastructure of your service/program/initiative, but does that mean that you should do nothing? One of the most valuable lessons that I learned last year at the ACPA Residential Curriculum Institute was this: You cannot let the perfect be the enemy of the good. If I had not earned that, this article would still just be an idea in my head. Even a small effort toward increasing your departmental support of international

*Continued on page 22*
- Continued from page 21

students will have both an immediate impact on the lives of your students and a long term impact shaping the future direction of your departmental priorities. We must continue to ask these questions and let them guide the manner in which we align our efforts.

- Are we allowing inconvenience to cause us to avoid the best ways to serve our international students?

We are all guilty of being stuck in one practice or another for the wrong reasons, and this is no different for an organization like a residence life department. We must ask this question to get at the core of what is driving our processes and practices. Is it our mission, or is it convenience?

The purpose of this article has been to spur thought and discussion that leads to action on our campuses. The lens I am looking through happens to focus on international students, but these types of questions are not limited to any particular populations. In fact, I would encourage us all to take the time to ask questions like these to inform how we serve students from every walk of life: What are we setting out to do? Are we accomplishing that goal? Is that the goal we ought to be accomplishing? And if we find that what we aim to do is not in line with what we are doing (or what we ought to be doing), then let that lead us to a course of action that allows us to better consider all of our students and align our goals with their needs. The theme of this magazine is Making our World Fair. It is in the spirit of this theme that I ask a final pair of questions: How can we make the world fair if we do not make the effort to treat fairly those students who join us from all over the world? Indeed, what better way to make the world fair?

Steven Sweat
Programming and First Year Experience Coordinator
International Student Services
The University of Kansas