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Peer Mentor Circles to Support International Graduate Students: A Potential Solution

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Abstract: To address social and academic challenges faced by international graduate students, I explore the possibility of implementing a peer-to-peer group mentor concept commonly used in the workplace called mentoring circles.

International graduate students account for the majority of international students in higher education (International Education, 2015). Over the last 35 years, international graduate students have come to the U.S. in droves providing many economic and academic benefits to domestic universities (Andrade, 2006). International students offer new perspectives for domestic students and faculty, therefore enhancing the learning environment. Although this community contributes to the learning environment significantly, they often encounter obstacles while pursuing their degree, such as social issues, cultural differences (Lee & Rice, 2007), language barriers (Andrade, 2006), homesickness, financial difficulties (Kaczmarek, Matlock, Merta, Ames, & Ross, 1994), and navigating a new educational system (Hellsten & Prescott, 2004). As of late, some universities have taken notice of the challenges experienced by international graduate students and have implemented programs to promote success amongst these students, such as peer mentor programs.

The most commonly recognized mentoring model is the *traditional model* in which a novice individual is paired with an experienced individual within the same field or area of interest (Kuhn & Castano, 2016). This traditional model has recently moved toward mentoring networks and peer-to-peer mentoring groups such as mentoring circles (Cross & Thomas, 2011). Commonly used in the workplace, mentoring circles are groups comprised of individuals from various levels and backgrounds who meet regularly to discuss a self-determined topic of interest (Schnieders, 2017). These circles are designed to motivate individuals and provide an opportunity to grow within the organization through collaboration with others. Diverse populations have found mentoring circles to provide a space in which individuals from different backgrounds can integrate with one another. From an organizational perspective, mentoring circles can enhance talent among employees by connecting individuals across departments, fostering the development of organic mentorships between different levels of management, and providing space for employees to share various skills and tools with one another to help them grow in their current roles. The social aspect of the concept increases accountability among all involved and fosters meaningful relationships between members, which is an integral part of the concept.

We know that relationships and social interactions sustain learning and development (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986) and relationships developed among peers provide the opportunity to learn from one another (Lundberg, 2003) thus enriching the learning process (Arnold, Kuh, Vesper, & Schuh, 1993; Tinto, 1998). Therefore, marrying the challenges encountered by international students with the mentoring circle concept could be a tool to create an environment in which international graduate students are better supported. Since mentoring circles offer a way to efficiently and effectively connect individuals from various backgrounds, I believe the concept will also be useful for international graduate students in addressing the known challenges they encounter. This is important to higher education institutions because

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international student recruitment at all levels is important for institutional diversity, global perspectives, and many other reasons. In addition, the field of adult education is positively impacted by the presence of international colleagues as are many other fields. Therefore, creating a more supportive environment could potentially increase international student recruitment and retention.

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