

# Understanding Immigrant College Students: Applying a Developmental Ecology Framework to the Practice of Academic Advising

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*Immigrant college student populations continue to grow, but the complexity of their unique needs and issues remain relatively unknown. To gain a better understanding of the multiple contextual factors impacting immigrant students from a systems-based approach, I applied Bronfenbrenner's (1977) human ecology framework to the study. Students interact with the environment, including exchanges with academic advisors, that influence student development, success, and retention. In this theory-based essay, I contend that the philosophy of a developmental ecology approach parallels the foundational tenets of developmental academic advising, mainly through an emphasis on context and working with the whole student. I offer strategies for practice and ideas for future application as well as use an adapted human-ecological model to illustrate immigrant issues.*

**KEY WORDS:** developmental advising, first-generation college student, human ecology, retention, student development, student engagement

The number of immigrant college students pursuing higher education opportunities will likely continue to increase in the future. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, over 12% of the total undergraduate population consists of immigrant students, including recent immigrants and second-generation learners (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). Several researchers articulated the urgency of understanding immigrants' college experiences (Erismán & Looney, 2007; Gray, Rolph, & Melamid, 1996; Szelényi & Chang, 2002), indicating that college success serves as the primary means for immigrants to improve their socioeconomic status (Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, & Todorova, 2008). Immigration issues are both timely and controversial as characterized by an ongoing debate focused on immigrant access to higher education opportunities. For example, the DREAM Act would allow children of undocumented immigrants the chance to access financial aid for postsecondary education opportunities in the United States (Perry, 2006). While emerging literature illuminates the challenges facing the immigrant population, few theoretical frameworks have

been introduced to help academic advisors—those in a unique position to serve the growing numbers of immigrant college students—understand their complex experiences.

In this theory-based essay, I address the following central question: Because of a dearth of empirical research and inquiry focused specifically on immigrant college students, how can academic advisors (including faculty members and professional staff who hold advising responsibilities) use an existing ecological systems framework (Bronfenbrenner, 1977) to better understand the issues and needs of immigrant college students? Kuh (1998) eloquently suggested that college educators often need to drop old, ineffective tools (including assumptions, belief patterns, and routines) when working with students. Instead, he (1998) advocated that educators develop new tools to meet emerging demands and address the changing landscape of higher education. While agreeing with Kuh's (1998) stance, I take a slightly different angle to his contribution. Instead of completely dropping old tools, I suggest that advisors recycle useful ones that might still have relevance to certain emerging student populations. Specifically, I suggest that academic advisors reuse an older tool—Bronfenbrenner's (1977) ecological model of human development—to gain a better understanding of immigrant college students and their development.

I focus this paper on the application of a theoretical ecology framework to academic advising practice. I base the framework on the human ecology theory introduced by Bronfenbrenner (1977, 1979, 2005) and applied to student affairs by Renn and Arnold (2003) in an analysis of peer culture. Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, and Renn (2010) described this contribution to the study of college student development as *developmental ecology*. Applying the ecology perspective to immigrant students will allow educators to utilize Bronfenbrenner's theory to inform research and practice (Knefelkamp, 1984). The approach offers a comprehensive systems-based framework for understanding immigrants' college experiences in terms of the varied interactions between students and their environments as well as validates the con-

textual factors that impact the lives of immigrants.

In the following sections, I describe the demographic shifts impacting the growing immigrant college-student population, discuss the rationale for pairing developmental advising and developmental ecology, outline definitions and challenges of researching immigrant groups, provide an overview of issues that immigrant students encounter, and offer an overview of Bronfenbrenner's framework. Also, I include suggestions and implications for academic advising practice. Last, I provide an illustrated model of the developmental ecology framework as applied to immigrant students.

### Immigration Demographics

Immigration continues to be a highly contentious topic of debate, both nationally and internationally. The total number of immigrants entering the United States has increased in recent years (Conway, 2009; Malone, Baluja, Costanzo, & Davis, 2003). Presently, over 38 million foreign-born individuals reside in the United States, and immigrants are expected to constitute a larger share of the U.S. population by 2018 (U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, n.d.). Based on the Center for Immigration Studies, Camarota (2007a) outlined the following immigration facts:

- Since 2000, 10.3 million immigrants have arrived; this is the highest 7-year period (2000-2007) of immigration in U.S. history. More than one half of post-2000 arrivals (5.6 million) are estimated to be illegal aliens.
- Of adult immigrants, 31% have not completed high school; 8% of U.S.-born natives have completed high school.
- Camarota (2007b) predicted that if immigration continues at current levels the nation's population will increase from 301 million today to 468 million in 2060, constituting a 167 million (56%) increase. Immigrants plus their descendents will account for 105 million (63%) of the increase.

Early previews of the 2010 U.S. Census indicate that during the past decade the United States surpassed the 300 million mark in population; approximately 83% of that growth came from non-Whites, many who are minority immigrants. Nearly one out of four Americans under 18 years old has at least one immigrant parent (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Based on immigration trends, predictions indicate immigrant students will increase on college campuses (2- and 4-year institutions) in the near future. Many of these students may be first-

generation, ethnic-minority immigrants (Erisman & Looney, 2007).

Despite the economic recession that started in the United States in late 2007, the Bureau of Labor Statistics, as noted by Rothkopf (2009), predicted that 63% of the 18.9 million new jobs projected for 2014 will require some postsecondary education. Many immigrants may enroll in postsecondary institutions to obtain the needed credentials and skills to enter these occupations. As a result, academic advisors and faculty members will have roles in preparing immigrant college students for employment in a changing, global marketplace.

### Definitions of Immigrant Groups

Immigration terminology can be complex and confusing (Roberge, 2003), which creates added challenges when attempting to research immigrant populations. Various organizations, including the Office of Immigration Statistics (OIS), use different definitions. According to Erisman and Looney (2007):

While the federal Immigration and Nationality Act defines an immigrant as any alien who enters the United States, except one admitted temporarily for a specific reason (such as a tourist or a foreign student), OIS generally limits the term to aliens legally admitted as permanent residents who may or may not eventually become naturalized citizens. (p. 46)

A different category, *refugee status*, generally refers to an individual who enters the United States and is unwilling or unable to return to his or her home country because of persecution or the well-founded fear of persecution based on a range of possible factors (e.g., race, ethnicity, religion, membership in a specific group). Immigrants do not bring identical experiences and generalizing across immigrant groups is inappropriate. A human ecology perspective allows advisors to take contextual factors into consideration when working with immigrant students.

For purposes of this article, I define *immigrants* to broadly include first and second generation as well as persons and refugees born abroad to parents who later immigrated to the United States. However, I do not include international students in this definition. Also, not all immigrants are non-White. I include White, non-White, and minority immigrants under the general definition of *immigrant students*; however, the experiences of the White and non-White groups should not be considered synonymous (e.g., experiences related to discrim-

ination and racism affect minority immigrants) (Cheatham, 1991). Also, I classify several immigrant generation groups based on the English as a second language (ESL) literature (Roberge, 2003). First-generation (1.0) students include foreign-born adults who are often foreign educated. Generation 1.5 students typically are foreign-born children of foreign-born parents; many attended middle school or high school in the United States (Roberge, Siegal, & Harklau, 2009). Second-generation (2.0) students are U.S.-born children of foreign-born parents; many were educated in the United States. Third-generation (3.0) students are typically U.S.-born children of U.S.-born parents (i.e., those in this group are generally not considered immigrants). In this essay, I focus on generations 1.0, 1.5, and 2.0.

Although issues impacting both immigrant and international student populations (e.g., isolation, discrimination, visa issues) tend to overlap, immigrant college students' issues are arguably unique from other students. Szelényi and Chang (2002) contended that "the literature on immigrant education highlights the position that the growing body of immigrant students in American higher education represents a distinct population with specific needs" (p. 59). Immigrant college students' lives are often dynamic and complex (Ngo, 2010), and extenuating circumstances often have led them to their new home. These circumstances are inherently connected to contextual factors often beyond their immediate influence or control, such as civil war, separation from family members, death, disease, physical injury, persecution, poverty, and discrimination in their home countries. Because of these special circumstances, immigrant college students deserve focused inquiry separate from international students.

In the academic advising literature, immigrant college students are consolidated into the *international student* category, likely for reasons of convenience (Kennedy & Crissman Ishler, 2008). For example, in a chapter published in the revised academic advising handbook, Castillo Clark and Kalionzes (2008) grouped immigrant students in academic advising discussions related to students of color and international students; however, differences distinguish these groups. Mainly, for example, the decision to travel and study in the United States (or other country) is typically a voluntary, deliberate decision for international students, but many immigrant students, including refugees, were forced to leave their home countries due to grave circumstances (Ogbu & Simons, 1998).

Academic advisors are potentially the first institutional agents to hear the complex narratives of immigrants upon their matriculation to campus. By intentionally taking the time and effort to learn more about the needs, issues, and experiences of immigrant college students, advisors will be in a better position to understand and serve this growing student population on campus.

### Exploring Immigrant Students' Experiences

According to Erisman and Looney (2007), some of the unique educational challenges for immigrant college students may include lack of information about college options, work and family responsibilities, financial need, academic preparation and achievement issues, and limited English reading and writing proficiency. Kilbride and D'Arcangelo (2002) and Gildersleeve (2010) identified several major needs that many college immigrants possess at the community college and university levels: developmental education (e.g., English reading and writing); food, housing, clothing, and transportation; emotional and moral support; financial assistance; family involvement; and information on issues and services (e.g., immigration, legal, and employment support). Those in K-12 institutions need information about postsecondary education and financial aid options.

As the overall immigration rates and enrollments increase in the United States, the experiences of immigrant student in college require attention, especially in terms of student development, engagement, and persistence (Conway, 2009, 2010; Kim, 2009; Stebleton, 2007). Immigrant students are often the first in their families to attend college, and according to Choy (2002), first-generation students are more likely than their more advantaged peers to be students of color, older than 24 years, female, nonnative speakers of English, and born outside the United States. They are also more likely to have a disability, care for dependent children, and be single parents. Although specific research on immigrant college-student retention data is scant, first-generation learners often face significant barriers to degree persistence and attainment (Chen, 2005; Jehangir, 2010; Mortenson, 2008). Perhaps most disconcerting, first-generation students are more than twice as likely to drop out of college than students whose parents have college degrees (Chen & Carroll, 2005).

The experience of immigration and college can be stressful—especially if the student needs to learn a new language (Brilliant, 2000; Rodriguez & Cruz, 2009). These issues can impact emotional

and psychological well-being (e.g., isolation, depression) (Chhuon & Hudley, 2008; Do, 1996). Brilliant (2000) stated that many new immigrants fear losing their home identity as they transition into the expectations of their new surroundings and adopt new roles; these transitions can create family friction. The unique status and situation (e.g., voluntary or involuntary, refugee, undocumented or documented, generation 1.0 vs. 1.5 vs. 2.0) of each immigrant student will likely affect his or her experiences. Some immigrant students will be undocumented, potentially leading to other issues related to financial aid status and career decision making (Gildersleeve & Ranero, 2010; Ortiz & Hinojosa, 2010).

Because of the complex dynamics and multiple factors that impact the immigrant college-student experience, I contend that academic advisors would likely benefit from reevaluating their professional roles in response to changing student demographics. In addition, I recommend that they consider adopting an ecological framework to use as a lens to view immigrant student issues. This framework would allow them to better understand the contextual factors that directly or indirectly influence immigrant college students and shape their development.

### Reexamining the Role of Academic Advising

Academic advisors can take lead roles in helping to better understand immigrant college students' needs and goals as they strive toward their academic and professional objectives. Higher education benefits when immigrant college students gain access to and achieve success at postsecondary institutions (Stebbleton, Huesman, & Kuzhabekova, 2010). The emphasis should be on success for all students. Immigrant students must receive access and support from academic advisors and other staff members, including faculty members and administrators, that encourage them to persist toward their educational and career objectives (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008).

Academic advisors are in an ideal position to serve immigrant college students. More specifically, new college students engage in interactions with multiple institutional agents upon matriculation. For example, an initial encounter for new students involves meeting academic advisors during summer orientation or registration (Braxton & McClendon, 2001-2002). These are important experiences for immigrant college students. Advisors at many academic institutions work as front-line direct-service providers to incoming students.

Therefore, the quality and authenticity of these initial exchanges can set the tone for the way students engage (or do not engage) with other student affairs professionals and faculty members as they move forward in their educational journeys.

However, according to Kim (2009), many immigrant students do not have positive experiences with institutional agents (including their academic advisors) when seeking academic advice. In her study, the students tended to seek out assistance from peers and other cultural enclaves for academic-related information rather than institutional advisors. Similarly, Torres, Reiser, LePeau, & Ruder (2006) discovered that Latino/a college students preferred information from friends and pamphlets over advisors. Kim's study was conducted with immigrant students attending a large research university; however, many immigrant students will begin their postsecondary education journeys at a community college or other 2-year institution (Conway, 2009, 2010). Regardless of institutional starting points, students must receive support that will help them persist toward their educational and career objectives, and to facilitate such student success, advisors need to understand how developmental advising philosophy aligns with developmental ecology approaches.

### Developmental Advising and Developmental Ecology

The developmental nature of the ecology framework as proposed by Bronfenbrenner (1977) parallels the philosophy underlying the tenets of developmental academic advising as offered by Crookston (1972/1994/2009) and O'Banion (1972/1994/2009)—mainly an emphasis on context (e.g., exploring the range of factors that impact student college success) and holism (i.e., viewing the student beyond the student-only role). More recently, scholars echoed this emphasis on understanding and valuing the whole student. Bloom, Hutson, and He (2008) discussed the merits of *appreciative advising* via a thorough collaborative process between advisor and student. Similarly, Schreiner (2010) advanced a strengths-based approach to advising in which the goal is to help students thrive during their college years. Because of this emphasis on holistic, developmental academic advising, a human ecology approach from a developmental perspective can serve as an effective tool to use in advising contexts with immigrant students.

The ecological approach allows for exploration of varied contextual factors from a system-based

approach. Also, the ecological perspective helps observers recognize and give credibility to environmental interactions that impact student development. Likewise, effective developmental academic advising is holistic and dynamic. O'Banion (1972/1994/2009) advocated for an advising process that includes five dimensions, including an exploration of life and vocational goals. For advisors who embrace O'Banion's academic advising model, class scheduling is typically the last dimension in the academic advising process. By using an ecological perspective, advisors will recognize that their work with immigrant college students goes well beyond helping them register for classes or select an academic degree program.

### Bronfenbrenner's Human Ecology Approach

Based on the varied needs and issues of immigrant students, advisors should explore integrative theories of student development and extend them toward new applications with diverse populations. Evans et al. (2010) provided an overview of various ecological approaches to student development, including developmental ecology. The main premise underlying ecological approaches, the interaction between the person (e.g., the student) and the environment, emphasizes the processes involved, not the outcomes of student development. According to Evans et al. (2010):

Ecological models can be considered integrative in the ways that they account for multifaceted contexts for the development of the whole person. Student affairs educators can use ecological models to understand how student development may occur and also consider how campus environments can be shaped to promote optimal growth and development. (p. 159)

Bronfenbrenner's (2005) research focused on the process of development with a focus on the bioecology of human development. Most notably, he advocated for an integrated systems approach to human development through which multiple diverse factors in the environment impacted the individual. Much of Bronfenbrenner's work reflected the contributions of Kurt Lewin, often recognized as the founder of social psychology. According to Lewin (1936):  $B=f(PE)$ , where B represents behavior and is a function of the interaction between person (P) and environment (E). Many person-environment theories, including those related to career development (Holland, 1966) and student retention (Astin, 1984), can be applied to

a range of student affairs contexts.

Serdarevic and Chronister (2005) applied the model to researching immigrant groups from a mental health context. From a student affairs perspective, Bronfenbrenner's ecology of human development framework can effectively be adapted and applied to higher education settings (Bryan & Simmons, 2009; Cerezo, O'Neil, & McWhirter, 2009; Renn, 2003). By analyzing the processes of student development via Bronfenbrenner's ideas, student affairs educators focus on the varied contextual factors that influence students' experiences in college. Using the ecological framework, they can analyze the student development processes through the integrated systems and multiple environmental factors that immigrants often experience. Bronfenbrenner (1977, 2005) proposed four interrelated components of the model: process-person-context-time model.

### The Developmental Ecology Theory

#### Process

The *process* component of the developmental ecology theory involves various forms of interactions between the individual and the environment over time, a concept titled *proximal processes*, which is grounded in the early foundations of the student affairs profession. Proximal processes should offer appropriate challenges for students, comparable to those articulated in Astin's (1984) theory of involvement and Sanford's (1966) description of challenge and support. A key premise of Bronfenbrenner's theory suggests that to experience development, students must engage in increasingly complex situations, actions, and engagement opportunities over time. The students participate in these processes inside the classroom as well as in out-of-class environments (e.g., residence halls, student organizations).

#### Person

The person component of the developmental ecology theory includes the holistic make-up of the individual, including behavioral, biological, cognitive, psychological, and emotional traits. These attributes are called *developmentally instigative characteristics*. Evans et al. (2010) indicated that student affairs educators with an understanding of these developmentally instigative characteristics see beyond the common student demographics that describe students—both individually and collectively. This integrative, holistic approach is vital as academic advisors work with increasingly diverse populations in the future.

### Context

In the developmental ecology model, *context* refers to the ecological environment. According to Bronfenbrenner (1977), “the ecological environment is conceived topologically as a nested arrangement of structures, each contained within the next” (p. 514). In this system, the core is the individual (student). The successive levels, or contexts, emanate outward from the core.

*Microsystem.* The first contextual level in the developmental ecology model is the microsystem:

[It is] the complex of relations between the developing person and environment in an immediate setting containing that person (e.g., home, school, workplace, etc.). A *setting* is defined as a place with particular physical features in which the participants engage in particular activities in particular roles (e.g., daughter, parent, teacher, employee, etc.) for particular periods of time. (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, p. 514)

Applying this definition to the college student population, microsystems significantly influence student development processes (Renn & Arnold, 2003). The revised ecology model for immigrant students, Figure 1, includes potential influences. For immigrant college students, examples of key microsystem factors could include academic and support services, peer groups, faculty interactions (formal and informal), college classes, place of residence, work responsibilities (both paid and nonpaid roles), family expectations, and social activities. Advisors need to consider the impact of these microsystems on individual student interventions; otherwise, institutional initiatives might fail (Renn, 2004).

*Mesosystem.* According to Bronfenbrenner (1977), “a mesosystem comprises the interrelations among major settings containing the developing person at a particular point in his or her life” (p. 515). The mesosystem, essentially a collection of microsystems, for immigrant college students could include interactions between peer groups, family, class and faculty dynamics, employment settings, and other environments. Mesosystems involve dynamic interactions between various microsystems across contexts.

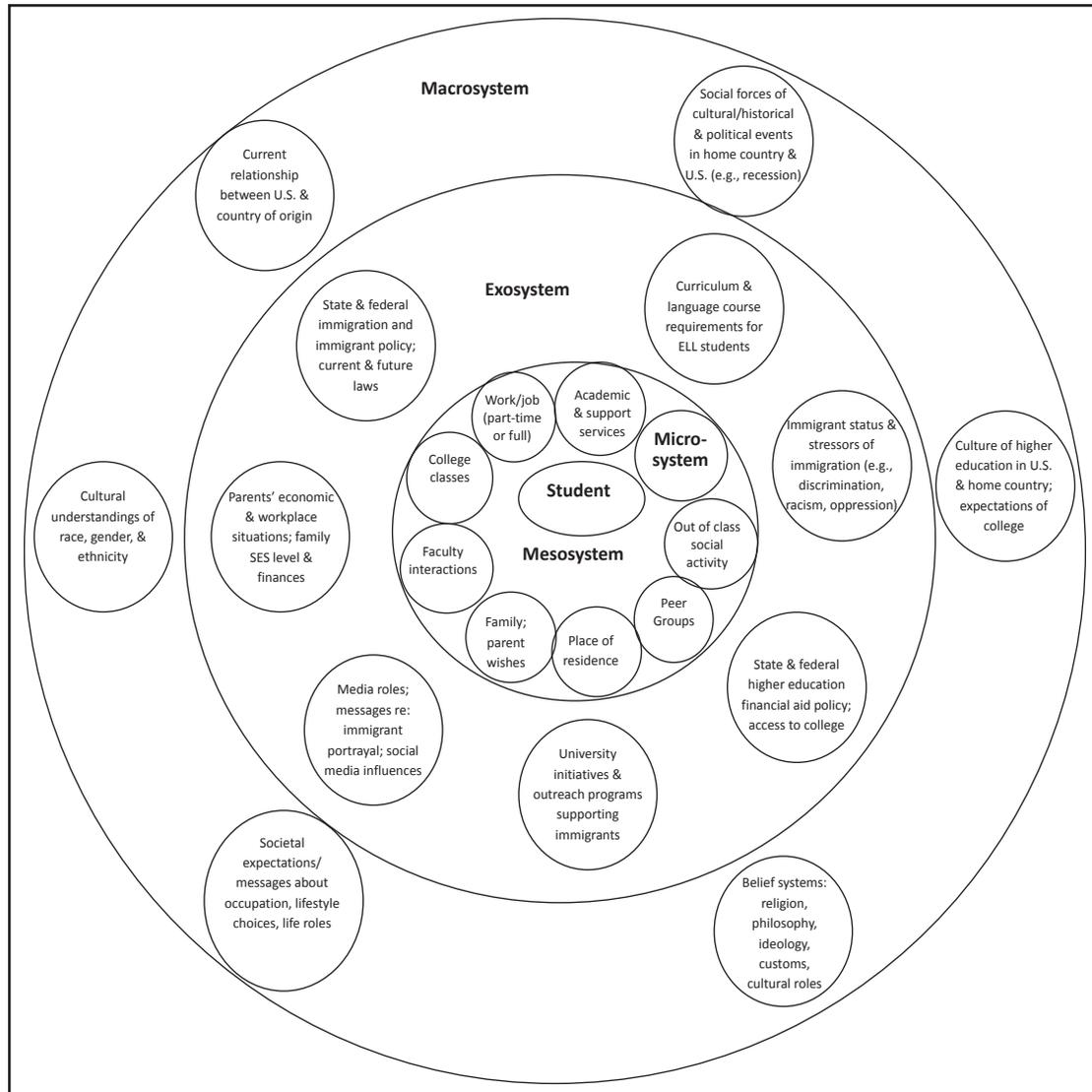
*Exosystem.* The next level outward, further from the student, is the exosystem. From Bronfenbrenner’s (1977, p. 515) perspective, “The *exosystem* is an extension of the mesosystem embracing other specific social structure, both formal and

informal, that do not themselves contain the developing person but impinge upon or encompass the immediate setting in which that person is found.” Factors in the exosystem can have meaningful impact on immigrant college students. Potential structures include state and federal immigration policies, immigration laws and visa changes, and curriculum and English language reading and writing requirements for English language learners of recent immigrant students (Ellis, 1995; Kilbride & D’Arcangelo, 2002). Other possible structures in the exosystem level include immigration status and the stressors of immigration, such as discrimination and racism (Yakushko, 2009), state and federal higher-education financial-aid policy including access to college, as well as college initiatives and outreach programs. It also includes media influences, including portrayals of immigrants. In the United States, for example, mass media messages and images convey notions of what it means to be American, while other media sources may exclude the immigrant experience. Immigrant students may be perplexed, wondering what does it mean to be successful in this new society? What does it mean to be an immigrant in a new country? Will I ever be considered and viewed as “American?” (Olsen, 1997). This list is not intended to be exhaustive, but rather to provide examples for advising professionals.

*Macrosystem.* The broadest level is furthest from the center, the student, and is called the *macrosystem*. Bronfenbrenner (1977) defined this level as “the overarching institutional patterns of the culture or subculture, such as the economic, social, educational, legal, and political systems, of which micro-, meso-, and exosystems are the concrete manifestations” (p. 515).

The macrosystem structures can significantly affect college immigrant students. Examples of macrosystem influences as illustrated in the ecological model could include social forces of cultural, social, historical, and political events in the home country; the culture of higher education in the United States; student expectations of college; belief systems including religion, philosophy of education, ideologies, customs and cultural roles; societal expectations and messages about occupation, gender roles, and lifestyle choices; cultural understanding and interpretations of issues related to race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality; and the current relationship between the United States and the country of origin (e.g., agreements of immigration policies). All four levels are interactive and interconnected; they do not stand in isolation.

**Figure 1.** Potential influences on immigrant students



*Note.* The immigrant student label at the center of model could include 1.0, 1.5, and 2.0 generation; refugee; documented/undocumented peoples. The experiences of each immigrant student will determine personal ecology and the factors impacting their development. Not all immigrants will experience the same influences. The list of influences is not exhaustive; these are potential factors that might influence immigrant students.

This figure is based on Bronfenbrenner's (1977) work on ecology of human development and Renn's (2003) figure. This adapted version is printed with permission from the American College Personnel Association (ACPA), One Dupont Circle, NW at the Center for Higher Education, Washington, DC.

*Time*

Throughout his career, Bronfenbrenner experimented with the component of time in the ecology theory. He divided it into three levels: microtime,

mesotime, and macrotime, loosely corresponded to the various system levels. Examples of the impact of time influencing immigrant students include the following: when immigrant families settled

in the United States; immigration and financial aid policies at the time of attending college; and family dynamics, such as a student's separation from a parent. Another example of time across the life span relates to events during the time period that students attend college. Immigrant students' experiences of college prior to the tragic incidents of 9/11 likely differed from those who attended after the attacks. Immigration policies and post-9/11 sentiments changed significantly after the attacks and featured an increase in discrimination and resentment toward certain immigrant groups.

Looking toward the future, advisors may consider the ramifications of the recession that began in December 2007 on the lives and values of current and prospective immigrant students. By analyzing the historical period of student enrollments in postsecondary institutions, advisors explore the influence of Bronfenbrenner's time component (chronosystem) and the interacting components between person, process, and context.

### Strategies for Advisors

Academic advisors can utilize the ecological framework as a lens to view the needs and issues of immigrant college students; its merit lies in the ability it gives one to explore interactions and processes rather than to explain outcomes. The human ecology strategies should not be generalized across all definitions of immigrant groups because the needs and issues vary widely across immigrant populations due to unique circumstances. For example, a strategy that might be effective for a generation 2.0 immigrant student might not be appropriate for a person recently immigrated.

Evans et al. (2010) explained that the ecological framework offers a holistic approach through which issues related to time, place, and culture, in addition to students' individual differences, are considered. This approach is particularly relevant to immigrant students because of the multifaceted aspects of their lives (cf. Rendón's [1996] concept of border crossers and Bhabha's [1994] ideas on hybridity). Ngo (2010) emphasized that urban student immigrants often lead lives filled with ambivalence; they receive multiple messages about the aspects of life deemed important. Academic advisors can help immigrant students navigate through these divergent messages by intentionally assisting their exploration of contextual factors from an ecological perspective.

Advisors may consider several practical suggestions for providing direct service to immigrant college students. First, they will likely find Bron-

fenbrenner's developmental ecology framework to be timely and applicable to multiple contexts. The person-environment perspective allows educators and student to see a fit between the interacting factors between the individual and his or her environment. Some students may benefit from coconstructing with an advisor a visual image of their lives (e.g., life history map), or they can collaborate to create an actual illustration of their own personalized ecology (Renn & Arnold, 2003). Advisors and students can codesign this visual representation together through the contextual system described by Bronfenbrenner (1977) while discussing the factors of influence. This systems-based approach is consistent with more recent contributions from the career development literature that encourages individuals to view life-career planning decisions from a constructivist, holistic, and dynamic perspective (Brott, 2005).

The human ecology framework—with a focus on contextual influences and constructivist philosophy—works for those wanting to understand the immigrant experience (Guido, Chávez, & Lincoln, 2010); for example, advisors might explore the most immediate microsystem factors impacting new immigrant students. These important factors should directly affect the establishment of the advising relationship. Advisors can initiate discussion around students' courses, peer groups, faculty interactions and use of office hours, academic support systems, peer involvement, degree program and career influences, and family expectations. Based on the advising models of O'Banion (1972/1994/2009) and Crookston (1972/1994/2009), many advisors already initiate these conversations with all their students. As the advising relationship develops over time, advisors may discuss factors in the exosystem and macrosystem levels that directly address unique aspects of immigrants' lives. Examples might include discrimination experienced on campus, immigration status, beliefs around cultural roles and expectations, and larger societal expectations and messages (e.g., addressing aspects of perceived success in this culture).

Second, as they learn more about the ecological factors that potentially impact immigrant students, advisors can offer additional targeted services and initiatives focused on their success. Kilbride and D'Arcangelo (2002) stated that outreach activities can help fulfill a variety of needs ranging from education and language skills, emotional and moral support, financial support, and information on issues and services related

to immigration status and legal support. Many of these needs tend to be focused on the exosystem level; they impact immigrant students, yet individuals might not have direct control over these environmental influences. Recently, both 2- and 4-year institutions have allocated more resources and efforts to high-impact educational practices such as learning communities (Kuh, 2008; Stebleton & Nownes, 2011). Specific learning communities targeted toward immigrants and historically underserved student groups include the program integrated at Inver Hills Community College (Minnesota) several years ago in which recent immigrant students took a theme-based package of courses that included two developmental English classes focused on writing and reading skills. The other two courses integrated fundamentals of public speaking and a one-credit career planning course. Multicultural learning communities, including the Inver Hills Community College initiative, demonstrate effectiveness in engaging and retaining diverse college student populations (Jehangir, 2009, 2010).

In addition, a number of institutions in New York, including the CUNY system and LaGuardia Community College, have implemented programs, such as those involving integrated experiential-education opportunities, designed to help engage immigrant students (Erisman & Looney, 2007). Some of these programs focus specifically on helping immigrant students complete developmental-English course requirements in an expedited manner through intensive language programs (Mellow, van Slyck, & Eyton, 2003). In California, the Puente Bridge Project focuses on outreach to Hispanic students to help them access higher education options, including 4-year degree opportunities. Academic advisors can assume new roles in these initiatives either as support liaisons or as facilitators in learning communities and first-year experience programs (Hunter & Murray, 2007).

Third, academic advisors and directors of advising units might consider providing ongoing professional development opportunities for student affairs educators and faculty members focused on diversity-related issues. Training could include updated information about changing demographics, common needs and issues of immigrant college students, and skills-specific training about working with immigrant students. More specifically, advisors could take lead roles on educating colleagues about the ecological framework and the factors that influence immigrant college students. Examples

of training components should include role plays, communication skills, and other counseling-related professional competencies. Additionally, advisors can attempt to learn more about the cultures of the immigrant groups they serve (Stebleton, 2007).

Fourth, immigrant students tend to rely heavily on peer networks and hang out in formal or informal peer enclaves (e.g., student associations and clubs) (Kim, 2009; Skahill, 2003). Peer groups tend to be key microsystem influences (Renn, 2004). Student affairs professionals should establish mutual collaborations with student groups that are affiliated with immigrant college students. For example, academic advising units might partner with student organizations to hold advising hours within the physical space of the student group at the union. Advising and career development professionals could offer a degree program planning session or a resume workshop at a monthly meeting for a student organization that primarily serves immigrant students. Related to this strategy, advisors can assist immigrant students to create and co-lead student groups and activities. For example, the Somali Student Association at the University of Minnesota–Twin Cities recently sponsored an event in Minneapolis to celebrate the 50th anniversary of Somali independence. This activity helped to build collaboration between the university and the greater urban community. In addition, the event helped students to explore factors related to their macrosystem (e.g., interactions with the local community, social forces related to culture and history of home country, relationships between the United States and their home of origin). Student affairs units, led by academic advisors, can get actively involved to help build these types of partnerships without borders that are articulated in the *Envisioning the Future of Student Affairs* document (American College Personnel Association & National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, 2010).

Fifth, academic advisors might use technology and online social-networking media (Martínez-Alemán, & Wartman, 2009; Muñoz & Strotmeyer, 2010) in their interactions with students. Tools such as Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, blogs, del.icio.us, Skype, and other social media can be effective strategies to reach students. Immigrant students may feel more comfortable interacting with institutional agents through informal, indirect means of communication. Advising units might consider adding online advising services as a strategy to complement in-person services. Facebook pages can be added to highlight programs, services, and

student clubs. A current project in the form of a digital archive at the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities titled *MN 2.0* involves reading and analyzing the Facebook pages and posts of Hmong, Mexican, and Somali immigrant students. By examining topics, communication styles, and the issues of immigrant students (e.g., ethnic identity and pride, gender and sexuality, homeland politics, and religion), academic advisors gain a better understanding of identity-related concerns and needs.

### Conclusion

It is an exciting time for academic advisors, who can play a unique and important role in response to the increasing diversity of students. By intentionally applying Bronfenbrenner's human ecology theory to the immigrant college-student population, advisors can identify contextual factors through the ongoing interactions between the multiple system levels of the student and the environment. The ecology model is an old tool that is refined and sharpened to serve the emerging immigrant student population. Furthermore, advisors are encouraged to take on new and innovative roles related to student engagement and success at their campuses that enhance the student experience for all students, including immigrant and other historically underserved groups (Stebbleton & Schmidt, 2010).

Solid, well-planned developmental academic advising programs and practices are critical to helping engage and retain all college students. As Kuh (1997) stated, "It is hard to imagine any academic support function that is more important to student success and institutional productivity than advising" (p. 11). The developmental ecology framework complements the foundational tenets of holistic developmental academic advising, and it provides a unique and relevant lens to help academic advisors see and meet the needs of immigrant college students. More specifically, the developmental ecology framework can serve as another valuable tool in advisors' toolboxes to address the vital and timely issues related to student development, student success, and the retention of immigrant college students.

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