Adviser Invaluable to International Students

On a dreary Friday afternoon in Bloomington during the midst of undergraduate registration, University Division academic advisor Remedios (Medy) Alfonso sits talking with three of her undergraduate advisees. Her office is decorated with the measures of her craft, assuring her students that they are in capable hands.

Combating this dreary day are numerous balloon bouquets, flowers, and congratulatory cards. Alfonso humbly presents her newest accolade to add to an already impressive collection. She was recently awarded the Outstanding Academic Advisor Award by the University Division of IUB. "I was so surprised," grins Alfonso. "And this award is so special because it comes from my peers and from my students. And that means a lot to me."

Alfonso has been an advisor with the University Division for 22 years. "I started as a graduate student and I've been here ever since," she recalls. Specializing in advising international students, Alfonso is the primary contact for all international undergraduate students entering the IUB community. She begins meeting with her advisees during orientation, starting with a group meeting that helps set the tone for upcoming, individual appointments.

"I start right away to get to know them. I want them to know that someone is here to help them, to answer their questions, to listen. It's important that they know someone cares, and I want them to know that I will be here for them," says Alfonso.

Alfonso finds that most of her individual work with students focuses on helping them to adjust to a new academic environment. She helps them find tutors and introduces them to support services that will aid in their continuing academic transition. "Language is obviously the biggest barrier my students have to overcome," says Alfonso. "But it is so interesting and rewarding to observe students absorbing the culture and learning the language. Within the first six months, they are well on their way to being completely Americanized. Everything is 'cool' and they use new words and phrases and are interested in things they have never known before. It's absolutely fascinating."

But Alfonso's work with advisees does not center solely around academic issues. While the Office of International Services (OIS), with whom Alfonso maintains a strong working partnership, is primarily responsible for external adjustment and transition issues for international students, Alfonso finds herself dealing with similar issues on a daily basis. Of the nearly 400 advisees with whom she works each year, Alfonso estimates that over half are international students. The majority of those coming through her office are from Southeast Asia.

"There was a time when most of our international students came from the Middle East, but now more and more are coming from Korea, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, and other Southeast Asian countries."

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"Medy takes care of us. She looks out for us and listens to us and guides us. And not just during the first two years. That's why we keep coming back to her for guidance and support. Medy is a very important part of the international student experience at IU."

– Dennis Ramawy, Junior International Student

University Division academic adviser Medy Alfonso, second from left, poses for a quick shot with some of her Indonesian advisees.