

Recognizing the Value of International Students

Two profound transformations in recent years have forcefully drawn the attention of American university educators to the value of international students. First, after decades of being the preeminent destination for international students, the United States is facing stiff competition from other countries for the very best international students. This is of concern because these students have played a major role in making American universities global centers of innovation and excellence. Second, there is a growing recognition that foreign-born students serve as powerful agents or catalysts of internationalization, providing many American students with their first contact with another culture. These shifts are important for us to recognize so that we can continue to recruit the top students worldwide and to further the global outlook of our geography students and programs.

For much of the past half century, the United States has not had to worry about attracting international students. In the late 1970s when I came to the U.S. for graduate studies, I was one of just over a quarter million international students in the country. By 2003-2004, this number had more than doubled to 572,500, representing 40 percent of all internationally mobile students (*Open Doors*, 2006). Since the international student share for the second largest destination country, the United Kingdom, is only 21 percent, it is not surprising that we have become comfortable in the assumption that the top international students will continue to flock to U.S. campuses with little effort on our part.

Yet there is evidence to suggest that we are losing ground. Since 2002, the number of international students coming to the U.S. has actually declined. And, our share of all internationally mobile students is down a full 5% from what it was in 1997-1998. This decline can be attributed to a number of factors. These include more stringent processing of visas after September 11, 2001 and perceptions that the U.S. has become less welcoming to international students. Also important is the entry of new players: countries such as the U.K. and Australia have begun recruiting international students

aggressively in recent years. This is occurring at the same time that major embarkation countries such as China and India are increasing their own higher education capacities.

Geography is bound to feel the impact of these changes. The *Open Doors* data show that the two fields with the greatest declines in international student enrollment over the past few years were the mathematical and computer sciences—which are often feeders for our GIS majors—and the social sciences. Consequently, we need to become more proactive if we are to continue recruiting outstanding international students. Here are a few examples of specific actions we can take:

- When traveling overseas, meet with potential students in the local university to tell them about your program.
- Ask overseas alumni of your department to publicize your program to their very best students.
- Enlist currently enrolled students and faculty to correspond with potential international applicants.
- Critically examine your department's website and brochures to see if they convey a global message and an openness to international students.

We also need to reexamine our engagement with international students once they are in the United States. Many American universities offer a complement of services to help new international students negotiate hurdles related to housing, transportation, finances, and immigration. Geography departments often provide orientations to help the students adjust to the cultures of the department and university. As a recipient of these services many years ago, I can attest to how important they were in helping me through those early, confusing weeks in the United States.

What we have been less successful in doing, however, is recognizing and taking advantage of the potential that our foreign-born students offer in advancing internationalization in our departments. Thus, by focusing solely on assimilating international

students and training them to be ambassadors of American culture, we have tended to overlook the wealth of global knowledge and connections that these students bring to our campuses. The recognition that their cultural background is an asset rather than a liability to be overcome can be extremely empowering for international students. Here are a few specific actions we can take to benefit from the knowledge of our international students:

Ask international students to give presentations on the state of geography in their home countries. These could become an integral part of "geographic thought" seminars.

Recognize publicly the unique perspective and training of international students in your classes. When teaching a world geography class,

invite these students (or international graduate students) to make presentations on their countries of origin.

Use your networks of international students and alumni to build a list of "friends of the department" in various countries. It will provide valuable connections for faculty and students conducting overseas research.

Enlist international students to provide training in cross-cultural communication for faculty and students conducting research or going on a study abroad.

Coming to the United States as an international student widened my perspective and horizons in ways that I could have never imagined. Given the large number of international students in the U.S., we are now in a position to ensure that *all* our students are able to experience the same excitement and wonder of living in a global community right on our campuses. If we don't, others will: a large billboard across from the U.S. consulate in Chennai, India announces to students standing in long lines for an American visa that there is no wait to get an Australian visa! ■



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