

International Students on U.S. Campuses: A Win-Win—For All

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As more institutions emphasize the importance of giving students a global experience, bringing students from overseas has been a critical path to internationalization. —Fischer, 2018, para. 7

From the late 1970s to the early 1980s, I was an international student at the University of Minnesota—Twin Cities. I was on the classic F-1 student visa. My decision to do graduate work in the United States was based on recommendations from a goodly number of my professors in my undergraduate college in my birth country. They, too, were once graduate students in prominent, international-student-friendly U.S. universities: Michigan State University, Minnesota—Twin Cities, Syracuse, Indiana University Bloomington, and Wisconsin—Madison. They were esteemed ambassadors of the U.S. higher-education system, teaching and conducting research in a British-style tertiary institution in an emerging economy. They were an impressively unique, self-assured group.

I enrolled in Minnesota as a recipient of two government academic scholarships. I met another international student whose government had also sent her to the same university in hopes that she would return to contribute to developing the health-care infrastructure of her birth country. We got married and had two sons, now surgeons. We held tenured faculty positions at a Research I university in the mid-Atlantic region. I stayed in the academy, for the most part; she moved to the U.S. federal government, where she now serves in the National Institutes of Health, in Bethesda, Maryland. I provide, for two reasons, this personal background, the likes of which are, inarguably, legion, even banal, and are

standard fare across the United States.

First, to demonstrate the enduring universal appeal (and attraction) of U.S. higher education, which is widely regarded as a model of global excellence. For example, strictly from a research perspective—and based on five academic disciplines and the peace award—seven of the top-10 universities with the most Nobel Prize-winning graduates are in the United States. Additionally, according to one analysis, more than 70% of the world’s top-25 universities are in the United States. From the standpoint of pedagogy, U.S. education is rote-learning averse. Students are expected to be active participants in their own educational development, raising questions, challenging orthodoxies, departing from the beaten path, creating knowledge, debunking their own assumptions, thinking broadly and eschewing provincialism, embracing and asserting difference. Then, there is the coveted attribute of profound racial diversity and its positive effects on the college experience—for both students and faculty. There is a paucity of such strengths in the educational systems of emerging economies—and elsewhere. Therefore, even though international students have anxieties about studying in the United States, they still express optimism about studying here primarily because of the unique opportunities it offers: meeting the top people in their disciplines, improving their English-language skills, gaining field experience after graduation, participating in quality educational programs and in experiential learning, and interacting with Americans firsthand (Johnson, 2018). Because interacting firsthand with Americans emerges as a major plus of the students’ U.S. experience, having international students in our midst can serve as a conduit for building relationships—and for our taking full advantage of their implications for establishing a more harmonious global community.

Second, to reemphasize an oft-ignored fact: that international students are a resource through and through to the U.S. economy—that is, from their setting foot on U.S. soil to their holding postgraduation employment. Consider: In 2016, international students, 67% of whom received much of their funding from non-U.S. sources, contributed nearly \$40 billion to the U.S. economy, creating or supporting more than 450,000 jobs, according to a report published by NAFSA: Association of International Educators. In 2017, 18,365 international students enrolled in 10 universities in the Philadelphia metropolitan area alone contributed more than \$812 million to the economy, supporting nearly 12,000 jobs. Beyond the bald numerical impact of international students, *Open Doors 2017* concludes that they contribute to “America’s scientific and technical research and bring international perspectives into U.S. classrooms, helping prepare American undergraduates for global careers, and often lead to longer-term business relationships and economic benefits” (“Economic Impact,” 2018, para. 2). Yet, disappointingly, the political landscape today for these students is discomforting, to say the least.

Interactions between domestic and international students on U.S. campuses create a campus culture conducive to mutual educational development. During the past academic year, for example, I taught global communication on the three largest continents, by land size: Asia, Africa, North America. The course examined the interface between cultures and business practices within the framework of strategic communication and global ethics. U.S. and international students in the course enriched one another through required classroom discussions that fueled raw, no-holds-barred arguments; that engendered critical musings; and that prompted vertical-pronoun accounts of intercultural and cross-national encounters. Perspectives were presented with a palpable lack of deference to “safe” ideas and to staked-out positions.

But even with its legendary strengths, U.S. higher education has challenges that call into question some of its fundamental strengths and core values. Some of those challenges are detailed in two recent books, one by Grawe (2018), the other by Caplan (2018).

Grawe, a former associate dean at Carleton College, identifies three such challenges: (a) headwinds that, beginning in 2026, will result in a rapid decline in the native-born, prospective-applicant pool and that will reshape the demographics of U.S. universities, which will increasingly depend on full-paying students in response to shrinking enrollment numbers; (b) changes in interstate migration, with the South and West of the United States indicating an increase in student demand for four-year college, the Northeast, a significant decline; and (c) decreases in research funding at the national level. In contradistinction, tailwinds buffeting Temple are fueling enrollment trends, necessitating growth in the number of its programs, but without a commensurate growth in state funding. On the

game-changing threats of declining applicant pools in the United States, nearly all major research universities are launching (or expanding) international marketing campaigns to attract robust international applicant pools, to establish joint-degree programs with overseas institutions, and to develop degree-granting international campuses. Temple, for example, has eight distinct campuses, two of which are international: in Tokyo and Rome. It offers regular study-abroad programs in Dublin, London, and Spain and study-away opportunities worldwide. Cornell University has campuses in Qatar and Singapore; American University, in Washington, D.C., has a campus in Qatar, as does Northwestern University. The point here is that the international arena, as it should be, has always been a recruiting ground for prospective applicants to U.S. higher-education institutions.

Such international recruitment is becoming even more critical as enrollments in 14 state-supported universities in Pennsylvania declined this fall for the eighth consecutive year. Nationwide, enrollments have declined for seven consecutive years. Temple is in a much stronger position in that its “freshman enrollments have crested at just over 5,000 for the last few years,” said Shawn L. Abbott, vice provost for admissions, financial aid, and enrollment management.

Caplan, a professor of economics at George Mason University, bemoans (a) the intellectual apathy of a majority of U.S. students he described as “philistines”—those who cannot be inspired, even by the best teachers; (b) the gap between skills students learn on campuses and those workers use; and (c) the penchant among students for “easy As.” As Caplan notes, “students frequently flee to easier majors” to earn “easy As.” The international student’s experience seems far removed from Caplan’s less-than-sanguine assessment. As a late-1970s international student, I saw the full panoply of academic rigor, high expectations, and cutting-edge analysis, precisely the qualities that motivated me to experience a U.S.-style education. Nearly four decades later, the U.S. academy still has all the hallmarks of those qualities—and more.

In much of Asia, Africa, and South America, a demonstrated association with U.S. higher education is a badge of honor. And, because of the self-selection process of applicants to U.S. colleges and universities, the latter are assured of having, more often than not, the crème de la crème in their applicant pools. Among international students in my cohort at Minnesota, the meme was, “I did not travel 10,000 miles to the USA to flunk.” Fact is, particularly for international students from emerging economies, their success translates into community-wide pride—that is, the entire village, as it were, revels in “our daughter’s academic [or professional] accomplishments in the United States.” In that context, then, it behooves universities to rein in any tendency toward diluting admission standards just to ensure a high “customer satisfaction.” That can be accomplished through, among other things, applying more institutional brio to international-student recruitment; using a more individualized recruitment approach (Botelho, 2017); and capitalizing on our strengths as a mecca for intercultural and academic stimulation and exchange.

A global strength of the U.S. model is the exposure of students to “the modern workplace” through cooperative programs by which they spend significant time—usually during the summer—to burnish their on-the-job credentials and to iterate their bona fide interest in their academic majors. The drive is not necessarily to accelerate the pace toward graduation; it is to work toward combining academics and workplace know-how in preparation for the challenges of the professional world. Temple acknowledges such a need and, to its credit, encourages a systematic synergy between the classroom and the industry. But more than that, it has the Fly-in-Four programs that encourage international and domestic students to graduate smack on schedule. That in itself is another enduring quality of U.S. colleges and universities that is attractive to international students who choose us to contain costs while getting a world-class education and deepening their scholarly and professional accomplishments that project the heft of their educational experience.

How much do U.S. instructional faculty members learn from their international charges? A lot. Even so, recent national policies seem to dissuade inbound students from heading to the world’s No. 1 destination for international students. The freshman class at Temple in fall 2016 had 335 international students and 145 transfer students, compared with 181 and 128, respectively, in fall 2018—about a 35% decline in total enrollment.

On a personal note, efforts by Temple University to encourage its students to think globally underscore my growing interest to globalize *all* my courses, regardless of the level in which they are being offered. Teaching international students offers limitless opportunities to contribute to one’s global perspectives on what works well in a far-flung classroom and what needs to be tweaked domestically, revamped, or adapted to accommodate realities on the quicksand of educational priorities. It is also an opportunity to expand and to enhance one’s intercultural sensitivities, particularly for faculty members engaged in teaching and research in, say, the humanities and the social sciences. STEM fields, to which international students tend to gravitate, are a haven for international collaboration and understanding. For the student at the receiving end of the instructor-international-student exchanges, such exchanges are a wellspring of information, skills, practices, and experiences from which to choose; for the instructional faculty, they are a bellwether for curricular development and new research directions. I know how much I learn firsthand from my Chinese students in Philadelphia and in China, where I taught two graduate courses in 2018.

In light of globalizing forces increasingly gathering steam, efforts by nations and educational institutions to bridge cultural and political divides and to make the world a place of global reflection and sustained engagement require that students, teachers, and researchers be exposed to opportunities for transcontinental sharing of their expertise and interests. And for faculty members engaged in international projects in particular, it is an added—and a welcome—opportunity to revisit routine practices when they return to their U.S. campuses. This is one reason the Faculty Senate supports fully the inbound and outbound programs of the Office of International Affairs. An outcome of such synergy is an academy that is increasingly cosmopolitan and culturally more accepting, thus serving as a beachhead to deepening international collaborations and to bridging divides.

In conclusion, a U.S. faculty member who interacts instructionally with international students can benefit from the latter’s global perspectives, can share best international practices in classrooms and laboratories, and can present to students philosophical perspectives and dogmas different from those of other cultures and traditions. In essence, our international students make teaching, research, and community engagement and the institutions in which they occur a collective force for national reengineering, global impact—and change. Inarguably, our international students offer a lasting win-win—for all.

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