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Foreign student enrollment in U.S. postsecondary institutions: Issues and implications for student affairs

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Foreign student enrollment in U.S. postsecondary institutions: Issues and implications for student affairs

Abstract

A foreign student is defined as "a citizen of another country pursuing education in a U.S. school requiring a high-school diploma or its equivalent" (Agarwal & Winkler, 1985, p.510). The leading nation for enrollment of foreign students is the United States, with more than 325,000 enrolled in 1986 (Altbach, 1986). Foreign graduate students comprised approximately 41% of the full-time graduate student enrollment in American higher education in 1987 (Friedman, 1987). These facts highlight the impact of foreign students on postsecondary institutions in the United States and the subsequent implications for foreign student affairs staff.

FOREIGN STUDENT
ENROLLMENT IN U.S. POSTSECONDARY INSTITUTIONS:
ISSUES AND IMPLICATIONS FOR STUDENT AFFAIRS

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by
Cherie R. Kingkade

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A foreign student is defined as "a citizen of another country pursuing education in a U.S. school requiring a high-school diploma or its equivalent" (Agarwal & Winkler, 1985, p.510). The leading nation for enrollment of foreign students is the United States, with more than 325,000 enrolled in 1986 (Altbach, 1986). Foreign graduate students comprised approximately 41% of the full-time graduate student enrollment in American higher education in 1987 (Friedman, 1987). These facts highlight the impact of foreign students on postsecondary institutions in the United States and the subsequent implications for foreign student affairs staff.

This paper reviews the benefits of foreign student enrollment, student perceptions, status concerns of foreign students, and the effects of American education on foreign students. In summary, implications for student services are drawn from these areas.

Some Benefits of Foreign Student Enrollment

Benefits of foreign student enrollment on U.S. postsecondary campuses are numerous (Althen, 1983). Promoting interactive friendship among the peoples of the world facilitates mutual understanding among

nations. New markets for U.S. products may develop due to foreign students' exposure to these products while in the U.S. This exposure may influence students who are to become future leaders. Increasing the selection pool of prospective students by increasing the possible number of foreign students will help those U.S. institutions whose applications of American students are decreasing. Interaction with foreign students will help U.S. students learn more about other countries and will, over time, enable Americans to overcome their traditional ethnocentricity and to function more effectively in a world society. Educational interchange helps the U.S. to attract intelligent, well-trained people who are needed to compete with countries in high technological fields. Foreign students educated in the U.S. can help the developing countries of the world deal effectively with issues such as pollution, urban decay, shortages of critical commodities, etc.

Shared benefits for both foreign students and American students are acquiring the knowledge of other cultures, accepting cultural differences nonjudgmentally, and developing skill in interacting with culturally different people. In order to achieve these

benefits, institutions need to be aware of the cultural shock of foreign students and the American students' perception of foreign students (Althen, 1983).

Foreign Student Perceptions

Foreign students who appear the least foreign, speak English well, come from a higher socio-economic class, have had prior contact with Americans, and who major in liberal arts rather than physical or biological sciences are, generally speaking, more successful and better accepted in American colleges and universities (Shaffer, et al., 1966). Possibilities of good foreign/American relationships were less if the foreign students perceived that their home lands were held in low esteem by American friends. This low esteem did not affect casual contacts or cause feelings of dissatisfaction. Communication skills had the greatest effect on interaction, and the most commonly shared interest area was academics (Shaffer, et al., 1966). Thus, these factors merit deliberate and careful attention during the recruitment of foreign students.

Foreign students initially perceive U.S. college life favorably. Four to forty months later, their perceptions become less favorable, but foreign

students become most positive as their U.S. educational experiences come to an end (Shaffer, et al., 1966). The most important factors in a positive attitude by foreign students were the number of close contacts with Americans and a satisfactory social life. Therefore, providing contacts with American students and arranging social activities for foreign students would seemingly decrease unfavorable perceptions. For some foreign students, particularly those accustomed to highly structured curricular requirements, the loosely defined expectations (relatively speaking) of the American educational system may cause much stress. In this situation, the foreign student may seek out advice, information, and support from others more than an American student in comparable circumstances (Friedman, 1987). Foreign students clinging together is common on large campuses where there are larger numbers of foreign students (Shaffer, et al., 1966). However, this prevents the interaction that is potentially such a benefit to both foreign and American students and is a primary purpose of international education. This perceived group cohesiveness is more true of foreign graduate students who have an even more described curriculum and limited number of day-to-day American

contacts. This could be alleviated by more counseling, more orientation, and better housing accommodations (Althen, 1983).

Foreign students are perceived as violating U.S. immigration laws or manipulating the laws to their advantage (Althen, 1983). Foreign students may have difficulties with Immigration and Naturalization Services because of the complexity of immigration laws and the implementation of those laws. Many changes are made in immigration laws, and considerable discretionary authority is granted to immigration and naturalization service officers. Therefore, there are many interpretations of immigration laws, and it is easy to be misinformed (Althen, 1983).

American students meet foreign students most frequently in (1) social settings, (2) academic settings, (3) organized campus activities, and (4) religious functions (Shaffer, et al., 1966). Most of these settings were established on campus. For this reason, smaller colleges and universities, where repeated contact more easily occurs, may be better suited for foreign students. As important as any other factor is satisfactory housing for the foreign student in regard to location, cost, and quality

(Blegen, 1950). Again, smaller colleges and universities may more easily provide adequate on-campus housing than the larger, often overcrowded, institutions.

Status Concerns of Foreign Students

Foreign student status can be classified in three ways: (1) The status the student thinks he/she has acquired is subjective status; (2) Accorded status is given to a foreign student by other persons; (3) Objective status is given to a foreign student by disinterested observers (Althen, 1983). American students, who contribute to the accorded and objective status of foreign students, viewed foreign students both positively and negatively (Althen, 1983). American students perceived foreign students as being more cultural, intellectual, and mature, and as chronologically older. Foreign students were perceived as being socially different but neither more nor less social. American students felt that foreign students were basically all alike and that foreign students, in general, liked American students. American students perceived foreign students as self-righteous and noble,

the recipients of special treatment, and as persons who thwart the true objective of educational exchange by staying in the U.S.

Effects of American Education on Foreign Students

Foreign students reported several positive results of their U.S. education: more self-confidence, autonomous behavior, and relating to others as equals (Shaffer & Dowling, 1966). Foreign students felt that they were more tolerant and less ethnocentric because of their U.S. experience. They felt that they had gained in international understanding and outlook and in skills not available at home. Questions as to why they could not acquire these skills at home, and how to develop programs to share mastery of their technical skills, were common among foreign students. Improved English proficiency, and more confidence in using English as a universal language, were perceived as important results of the U.S. educational experience. Foreign students acknowledged the prestige of a U.S. degree and the upward mobility which might result from that degree. Foreign students also felt that a U.S. degree had given them greater independence and a heightened awareness of competitive concepts.

Foreign students, interviewed in their home countries after completing an American education, expressed the opinion that support by their countries for study in the U.S. was lessening, although they as students had only positive comments about the U.S. schools (Goodwin & Nacht, 1984). Decreasing support for the U.S. education of foreign students was due to undergraduate schools in foreign countries reaching a higher quality level, the expense of U.S. education, and the alienation between foreign students and their home countries (Althen, 1983). Alienation, the most commonly cited factor, is a phenomenon caused by undergraduate students being out of the country for four or five years at a highly developmental stage of life, returning to unfamiliar changes in their homeland, and being repelled by those changes or by a lack of standards that they had become accustomed to in the U.S. (Althen, 1983). Foreign graduate students suffered less from alienation. Their education was generally of shorter duration, and their maturity level was such that they could understand and adapt to circumstances and their reactions to them (Friedman, 1987). Alienation has often provoked changes, based on the foreign students' U.S. education, which have been

positive. Foreign students themselves state that their U.S. education has caused them to be result oriented, they have learned how to learn, and that they could easily return to the U.S. to live permanently (Bereday, 1969). They are impressed with the power and pervasiveness of consumerism in all aspects of American life and by the freedom of expression and choice.

A large percentage of foreign students from developing countries will move rapidly into positions of responsibility in their own countries. This is due, in part, to a scarcity of educated persons in developing countries, and because it is assumed that an American education has equipped them for such responsibility (Clark, 1987). Foreign students with an American education, who are in recruiting positions, will continue to perpetuate U.S. trained personnel in their ranks. Private companies, due to their willingness and ability to pay better and to provide a better work environment, often recruit the U.S. trained employees. The enhanced work environment of the private companies enables U.S. trained employees to implement their new concepts. The returning foreign students often enter positions where they have considerable influence on corporate training programs. Companies with U.S. trained personnel are more aware of

the global village concept and have had more global interactions and contacts, both serving to stimulate trade (Spaulding & Flack, 1976).

Implications for Student Affairs

The obligation and responsibility the receiving institutions have to foreign students must be addressed (Kintzer, 1979). These obligations and responsibilities impact foreign student affairs staff.

Foreign student affairs staff have responsibilities throughout the several stages of a foreign student's American education. Numerous factors, such as socio-economic status and English proficiency, must be considered during recruitment/admission to increase the probability of a successful educational endeavor. It is crucial for student affairs staff to be proactive rather than reactive. Orientation in the student's country should include evaluating and improving language proficiency, increasing familiarity with American life styles, and creating awareness of possible prejudices (McCrone & Zeigler, 1974). Communicating the factors in recruitment and the benefits of foreign students to American students, staff, and faculty can prevent misunderstandings.

Publicizing the benefits of foreign student enrollment through brochures and discussions will provide a more accepting, nurturing environment and an atmosphere of reciprocity.

Student affairs staff must facilitate foreign student contacts with Americans and help foreign students to define and achieve a satisfactory social life. Encouraging foreign students to attend organizational meetings based on languages, study abroad experiences, nationalities, genealogy, and shared academic interests can provide contacts. With the aid of foreign student affairs staff, foreign student organizations can discuss cultural diversities. Comparison of cultures reveals problems with assumptions and values, patterns of thought, and communicative styles. These activities should be reinforced from the third or fourth month of the foreign students' enrollment to the fortieth month. This is the time when perceptions become less favorable and attention should be increased.

Size of the U.S. college or university and housing facilities should be clarified to the foreign student. Housing should be on campus, if possible, to increase contacts and facilitate interaction.

Foreign student affairs staff should aid foreign students to maintain contact with their home country to prevent alienation and isolation. Advising and planning for trips home, promoting verbal and written communication, aiding contact with other students in similar situations, and accepting diversity can ease alienation and isolation. When problems do arise and are not addressed in a timely manner, the situation is exacerbated. Being expelled from a college or university, and returning home involuntarily, could be the greatest humiliation imaginable to a foreign student. Therefore, it is imperative that student affairs staff either act to prevent problems or promptly address problems as they arise.

Foreign student affairs personnel must be well versed in immigration procedures. Foreign student affairs offices, where such have been established, are charged with the responsibility of knowing and interpreting immigration laws and regulations and with representing the institutions in their relationships with the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service. Concerns such as regulations governing minimum academic loads and student employment can be highly technical. Errors can cause major problems for both the institution and the student.

Foreign students state that it is hard to relate to the U.S. until they experience hands-on opportunities. They need to be immersed in the daily experiences of U.S. life in order to appreciate more fully the American style (Althen, 1983). Implications for foreign student affairs staff aiding in this endeavor commence when the foreign student expresses interest in an American education and continue throughout enrollment.

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