

# Attracting Foreign Students to America Offers More Advantages

By C.L. MAX NIKIAS

Prestigious American universities are franchising their brands in the Middle East and Southeast Asia, building campuses and making it possible for students in those regions to receive an American degree while remaining at home. In doing so, however, they undercut an important component of American education and economy: educating international students in the United States.

For undergraduates especially, life at an elite American research university — with its unmatched opportunities to learn both inside and outside classrooms and laboratories — cannot easily be replicated overseas. McDonald's, Starbucks, Burger King, and Pizza Hut may taste the same in Boston, Bahrain, or Bali, but the experience of being at a great research university is not so easily exported. Students benefit most when they come together, full time, in a setting that offers both intellectual and physical community, a place where core academic values such as intellectual freedom, the unfettered search for truth, collaboration, diversity, gender equality, and even good old-fashioned school spirit are protected and encouraged.

Such an environment best serves foreign and domestic students alike. Indeed, the presence of foreign students on our campuses is beneficial for American society as a whole. Domestic students can develop friends from all over the world and learn informally about their cultures. In doing so, they become better prepared to compete within a global society. That is crucial at a time when Americans are being forced to move from a Ptolemaic worldview, in which we are the center of the cosmos, to a Copernican one, in which we are just one (albeit very large) satellite in a greater system. International students are used to the latter worldview, so our children have much to learn from them.

Moreover, from an economic standpoint, American higher education is our nation's fifth-largest service-sector export. Foreign students' tuition and living costs amount to \$14.5-billion annually in the United States, according to "Open Doors 2007," the Institute of International Education's annual report on international academics. Even more important, many of those students will stay here, providing a "brain gain" that will help fuel our nation's economic growth. Jim Clifton, chief executive of the Gallup Organization, has observed that most leading economists predicted a quarter-century ago that American economic growth would fall behind those of Japan and Germany by 2007. They estimated that Japan's gross domestic product would be roughly \$5-trillion by now, Germany's around \$4-trillion, and the United States' roughly \$3.5-trillion. The predictions for Japan and Germany's GDP's were reasonably accurate, but America's grew to \$13-trillion — unexpected growth that was attributable largely to the immigration of many of the world's best minds to America.

Even when foreign students go back to their countries, the United States still benefits. Those students typically return home with positive feelings toward our nation and, in my experience, are far more likely to build partnerships with American companies. And increasingly, in fields

like engineering, the presence of foreign graduate students at American universities helps ensure that jobs stay here. With our country producing too few engineers of its own, some companies might be forced to move overseas without the American-educated foreign students to fill some of those jobs.

Our colleges and universities are still the envy of the world. More than 580,000 foreign students come here annually, paying full tuition, despite the fact that Australia and Britain, among other countries, court them far more aggressively. But we must be careful that we do not lose our edge. Increasing numbers of international students are now going to Europe, in part because of tightened U.S. visa requirements in the wake of September 11. We must ensure that those requirements properly balance our security needs with the reality that international students are an ever more important aspect of American life.

It is not to the United States' competitive advantage to erect higher visa hurdles around our university campuses or to franchise out a diluted version of our universities to foreign shores. Rather, we should be sure that the best talent can come here, for our own benefit, for the students', and for the ultimate good of the entire world.

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