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Internationalization a must in higher education

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Regional

Internationalization a must in higher education

At least some international experience is becoming commonplace for college students, from those that go to other countries just for a short trip in the summer to those who do their entire studies abroad and even stay in those countries after they graduate. Another important way that American college students gain international experience is through the presence on their campuses of students from abroad.

Nowadays, because of demographic stagnation in many states as a consequence of flat and even negative high school graduation rates, more and more institutions of higher education are relying on enrollment of international students to make up for those U.S. students who are not enrolling. Additionally, because those international students pay higher rates of tuition, public colleges and universities find them as a good source of revenue.

Yet, we oftentimes fail to examine the data needed to fully understand what is going on when it comes to the migration of college students from one country to another. One of the most complete sources of information about higher education at the international level is the Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) annual World University Rankings report, which provides statistics and analyses about students moving from one country to another for postsecondary education.

This year's report shows that there has been a dramatic increase in the number of college students moving internationally for college. Between 2005 and 2012 there was a surge in the number of those students by 50 percent with a total of more than five million by 2015 deciding to study in a country other than their own. This reveals a swelling interest by

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college students to have an international experience.

Despite this worldwide interest in getting such an experience, the interest is not as high among U.S. college students. In fact, ours is one of the few countries in the world that host significantly more international students than we send abroad, about 13 times more. On the other hand, according to the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the U.S. remains the leading destination for international students, hosting around 19 percent of the world's mobile students. Yet, despite the fact that the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development shows that the U.S. is fourth (after Luxembourg, Switzerland, and Ireland) in disposable income and third (after China and India) in world population, it is only the seventh largest sender of international students worldwide.

It is also very telling that the two major destinations for U.S. students are countries for which no special language skills are necessary: the U.K. and Canada. According to the report, the major considerations of U.S. students when going abroad are location, lifestyle, ability to travel, networking opportunities, cost and flexibility of the programs they attend. One of the reasons behind choosing universities in other countries is the cost of attending them. Because higher education is much more

subsidized (in some cases even free) in many other countries, students feel they can get a lot from their money even counting for living expenses and transportation.

This latest point is interesting given that students from most countries still choose the U.S. as their favorite destination despite the fact that their living standards are lower and that U.S. higher education is the most expensive in the world. Despite this, international students are more interested than their American counterparts in the quality of programs than the factors around convenience that seem to command U.S. students' decisions.

U.S. students also seem to be more concerned about an educational institution's ranking and more interested in data related to employability after graduation than their international counterparts. International students who come to the U.S., on the other hand, are mostly interested in the prestige that comes from graduating from a U.S. institution. I once had a student from France who told me that she came to the U.S. because she wanted to study business and "if you have a business degree from the U.S., regardless of the school, you have better chances in getting a job in France."

U.S. students also say that, in general, it is more important for them to get in a school with a more impressive reputation than in actually doing well there.

For them it has to do with how they can impress others rather than how much they actually learn. Also, they feel that being at a well-known institution gives them a better opportunity for networking and getting a better chance to get a good job.

This is sad because what students learn and the skills they develop are the ones that will determine their future success.

Unfortunately, our educational system at the high school level seems to emphasize diplomas over gaining an education. And part of that education should include broadening their horizons and learning different languages. Europeans have an old joke about Americans. They say "the easiest way to differentiate a European from an American is by counting the number of languages they speak, for the latter is usually only one."

This is an issue that was famously addressed by the late Illinois politician Paul Simon in his 1980 book "The Tongue-Tied American: Confronting the Foreign Language Crisis." Yet, we are not doing much to address it – particularly in higher education.

It is time for U.S. colleges and universities not only to become savvier about attracting international students to make up for the decline in domestic enrollments, but also to improve international language skills while creating more opportunities for U.S. students to study abroad. And if they think such a goal is too expensive, they need to see it as a great opportunity for fundraising. No one knows better the benefits of an international experience than those alumni who have become successful in life because of it.

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