Integrating International Students into our Institutions: Challenges, Issues, Solutions

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- Correspondent with Inside Higher Ed, where I cover issues in international higher education – issues like study abroad, internationalization of the curriculum, and recruitment and support of international students.
- One of the questions I've been particularly interested in, in my own reporting, is exactly the issue that's bringing us here today – which is how well are international students being integrated onto U.S. college campuses? As many institutions have increased their numbers of international undergraduate students dramatically – in many cases drawing these students disproportionately from one or two source countries, China of course being the main one – how well are these new students fitting in, so to speak?
- This fall I wrote an article discussing a number of discrete incidents in which we could observe discrimination against international students, particularly those coming from Asia or the Middle East. These incidents took a number of forms, ranging from offensive Tweets to vandalism of Chinese students' cars to a column in a student newspaper at a public university arguing that U.S. tax dollars shouldn't be used to educate students from Afghanistan, China, Iran, Iraq, or Turkey, students who might "in the near future, become the enemy."
- Scholars I spoke with argued that thought these events might seem isolated, they can be seen as emblematic of a widespread but little-discussed problem – that is, discrimination against international students. One scholar who has studied this phenomenon, Jenny J. Lee, of the University of Arizona's Center for the Study of Higher Education, has used the term "neoracism," which refers to the use of a culture or a country of origin, rather than race, as a pretense for discrimination. Lee has found in her own research for example that while international students face more blatant discrimination off-campus than on-, even on campus they're subject to verbal abuse, which can take the form of stereotyping of their cultures or countries, criticism of their accents, or derogatory statements about foreigners in general.
- Beyond the question of overt discrimination, though, I want to return to this broader issue of integration. Even in absence of overt discrimination, is there too much isolation? A study published last summer in the Journal of International and Intercultural Communication found that nearly 40 percent of international students reported having no close American friends. Some of this seems to be attributable to issues of language proficiency, and some of it is attributable to "internal factors" (such as shyness) on the international students' part, but they also cited issues like a perceived lack of interest on the part of American students in other cultures.
- So here we are a room full of people who believe in the value of meaningful cross-cultural interaction and exchange: So what can we do about this? One of the gratifying things about

that article I wrote was that it stimulated some dialogue and inspired a fair amount of feedback, including a viewpoints piece that we ran in *Inside Higher Ed* by Larry Braskamp and Chris Glass, who drew on their research using the Global Perspective Inventory to offer three suggestions as to how universities can create a more inclusive campus climate for international students These fall under three main categories:

- 1. "Educational encounters that involve discussion and dialogue"
    - They particularly emphasize the value of cross-cultural dialogue in the classroom.
        - In their words: "Comprehensive internationalization efforts must consider how "encounters with difference that make a difference" may become more pervasive in the classroom. ….Such encounters evoke cognitive dissonance; alter existing ideas, views, and sense of self; and encourage new forms of interaction with others who are different from oneself. They invite students to interact with others across cultural, social, economic, and religious divides; and to reflect, share, and build on their experiences, as a means of dealing with cognitive dissonance."

    And they emphasize that all kinds of courses can incorporate dialogue, not just those dealing with issues of race or ethnicity, or other forms of identity.

2. "Educational encounters that provide a secure base of support for cross-cultural exploration"
    a. They've found in essence that international students who engage in activities reflective of their own cultural backgrounds view their campus more positively, and that in their words, "a strong social network of international student peers provides a secure base to begin exploring friendships with American students."

3. And finally they recommend "Educational encounters that involve partnerships among international student offices, counseling centers, and other student support services"

So I'll end my comments there with those three concrete suggestions by Larry Braskamp and Chris Glass, and I look forward to hearing all your ideas and suggestions on this topic as the session unfolds.

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