

## NEO-RACISM TOWARD INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

*A critical need for change*

**By Jenny J. Lee**

**I**NTERNATIONAL STUDENTS and their dependents contribute more than \$12 billion a year to the U.S. economy, yet for institutions of higher education, the greatest gains lie not in dollar amounts but in new insights and perspectives. As international students enter U.S. colleges and universities, they bring with them a wealth of curricular and cocurricular benefits that, if accessed, can substantially contribute to achieving an institution's educational goals. International students who stay in the United States add to the country's intellectual capital, while those who return to their home country tend to take with them a positive regard toward the United States. The United States educates many who take leadership positions in other nations, which can also build goodwill between countries. Perhaps most important, international students can broaden the perspectives of U.S. students as well as increase their appreciation for cultures around the world. International students, in turn, gain a greater understanding of U.S. culture. Positive exchanges are essential to improving diplomatic relations, increasing international awareness, and furthering multiculturalism, all critical components of a thriving global society.

**D**ESPITE the obvious value of the presence of international students, how they are treated once they are admitted has received limited attention. Much more effort has traditionally been expended on recruiting and getting these students in the door than on keeping them satisfied. In fact, in my interviews with international students, many report that once they were enrolled, their expectations were often left unmet. One international graduate student explained, "I was extremely disappointed with my program when I came here because it was not what I was supposed to be doing. What I had applied for and put in my application is very different from what the program was, and I felt

trapped." In more extreme cases, overt discrimination occurs.

In a case study that Charles Rice and I recently conducted, we uncovered tremendous discrimination against international students. Our study revealed that students from the Middle East, Africa, East Asia, Latin America, and India endured far greater difficulties in U.S. institutions than students from Canada and Europe. We call this discrimination *neo-racism*, which we suggest is attributable to skin color as well as culture, national origin, and relationships between countries. As students of color in the United States and as foreigners, international students, we discovered, are subject not only to racism, based solely on race, but also to neo-racism. We contend that neo-racism occurs in contexts ranging from political regulations to educational settings. The Patriot Act, for example, allows detention without limit, denial of due process, and violations of personal freedoms of some individuals; cumbersome foreign student tracking procedures; new hurdles for obtaining visas to enter the United States; and fingerprinting and profiling procedures in the name of maintaining national security. Similar policies, which we also see as neo-racist, are present in higher education. Our study revealed neo-racism in the form of less-than-objective academic evaluations; loss of employment or an inability to obtain a job; difficulty in forming interpersonal relationships with instructors, advisors, and peers; negative stereotypes and inaccurate portrayals of one's culture; negative comments about foreign accents; and so on. One of our respondents recounted one such situation: "A close friend of mine . . . is Indian. She told me about [some] trouble with her first advisor. [He made some] racial comments, also some sexist comments. . . . She had to change advisors, and it was very difficult for her. He had made a comment about 'wiping out the whole Middle East.'"

Learning can be negatively affected when international students perceive their environment as unwelcoming. International students may feel insecure about their language abilities, struggle to effectively communicate with instructors or advisors, and be isolated during class discussions or excluded from study groups. Despite these and other hardships, many international students feel pressured to stay enrolled because of familial or cultural expectations or as a way of saving face. They endure difficulties for the American degree, which they anticipate will provide greater rewards and opportunities than obtaining a degree in their home country. Many cases of discrimination are left unreported because international students are often fearful that if they make an issue of their situation, they will be deported. In sharing their experiences, the international students with whom we spoke appeared more calloused than angered. One informant said, "Yeah, we generally walk back home from campus, and it was not a big deal, but people threw bottles at us. Being international students, you get used to it." Such instances may be especially underreported because, as one of our informants explained, "International students don't feel very empowered or feel that they are in a position to say anything." When asked whether they regretted their decision to attend their institution, the majority of international students involved in our study, surprisingly, reported that they did not. They indicated that despite the difficulties, they would not have chosen to attend a different institution and would still recommend study in the United States to friends and family back home.

**I** BELIEVE that international students' tolerance of difficulties indicates that these students believe they must accept discrimination as the cost of earning an American degree. This sentiment limits all students' learning to the extent that it silences the diverse per-

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spectives of international students and allows the stereotypes held by U.S. students to remain unchallenged. Two primary questions need to be addressed: How can we help students—both international and domestic—understand the effects of discrimination and, more important, work to stop discrimination? And how can we reap the full educational benefits that international students bring to the United States?

Faculty, staff, and administrators must first be made aware of issues pertaining to international students. Language and cultural barriers are a common concern. Too many wrongly assume that a foreign accent and limited English-speaking ability indicate a lack of intelligence. Negative reactions to international students' accents and

related communication barriers have resulted in many international students feeling intimidated or fearful of asking for assistance. As a consequence, many rely on partial or incorrect information from their international peers. Detailed written information is especially helpful to international students, who can spend additional time reviewing these materials. Expectations should be clearly articulated, and written evaluation guidelines should be provided to all students. Campus ad-

ministrators and student affairs professionals hold a particular responsibility for creating as welcoming an atmosphere for international students as they do for domestic students.

Another common problem involves educator-student relationships. Cultural values discourage some students from speaking out in class or challenging authority. As a result, some of the brightest students may also be the most silent. International students should not be penalized too quickly for failing to openly question dominant opinions. Rather than forcing international students to adapt to Western modes of open debate, educators should consider using multiple discussion formats that allow diverse approaches to reacting and voicing opinions. Such formats include one-on-one meetings between educators and students and discussion in pairs or small groups. Increased internationalization of the curriculum and cocurriculum would also improve the learning environment for all students. The introduction of diverse views from within and outside

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the United States allows American students to gain greater insight into and appreciation for non-Western ideas and allows international students to share their ways of life with others.

To create a welcoming environment for international students, institutions should also move beyond cultural sensitivity training and institute, clearly communicate, and enforce strict codes of conduct regarding discrimination. In our study, no students, faculty, or administrators were disciplined for discriminatory statements or behaviors, and although a few cases of discrimination were reported, they did not result in sanctions. International students should also be informed of their rights. Many students involved in our study believed that because they were not U.S. citizens, they did not have the same rights as domestic students. One noted, "As an international student, your rights in the United States are so few." As a consequence, many felt they were being taken advantage of and treated unfairly. International students who have been made aware of laws concerning discrimination and harassment and procedures for reporting violations are likely to feel respected and empowered.

Institutions must also be held accountable for their actions. In 2003, Alexander Astin and I published an article about rethinking institutional rankings, suggesting that they could be based on the quality of the student experience rather than on selectivity, resources, revenue, and public media standings. Like many U.S. students, international students often choose a particular institution for its prestige or location, making assumptions about the quality of education they will receive. In reality, we could find no relationship between the prestige of an institution and the quality of education. Information about how well an institution hosts and prepares international students is not made available, except in recruitment advertisements and anecdotal testimonials. I suggest that development of rankings based on the quality of international students' experience should join development of those based on resources and programs specifically designed for international students. Such information would be well used and highly regarded by prospective international students.

Finally, U.S. students should be encouraged to study

abroad. The rate of international exchange is highly unbalanced. According to the *Open Doors 2004* report produced by the Institute of International Education, 174,629 U.S. students studied abroad in 2003–2004, compared with 572,509 international students who came to institutions in the United States. Of the U.S. students who study abroad, a large proportion study in Europe or in Westernized countries. In order for U.S.

students to fully understand what it means to be a global citizen and to learn to appreciate diverse cultures, they should spend time living and learning in another country, preferably in a country unlike the United States. Increased financial assistance and incentives and improved information may motivate more students to study abroad. Furthermore, students who currently study

abroad tend to be white and come from middle- to upper-class socioeconomic backgrounds. Increasing the number and diversity of U.S. students who study abroad increases the opportunities for those students to positively influence their peers back home in the United States.

**I**N SUM, truly internationalizing U.S. campuses will require educators to move beyond merely recruiting international students and counting international student enrollments. We must combat neo-racism and consider our important responsibility for improving foreign relations and for providing a quality experience for international students. The onus is on educators, administrators, and domestic students to encourage genuine and positive international exchange within the classroom and abroad. The benefits will accrue to all of higher education and to individuals across the globe.

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#### NOTES

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