

The author discusses the plight of international students in American academic institutions and makes recommendations for change.

Problems Faced by International Students in American Colleges and Universities

RANJANI SELVADURAI

The migration of students from one country to another for educational purposes is a phenomenon which has a long history. However, it was not until the end of World War II that many nations began to recognize education as a national priority with a conscious intent to strengthen economic growth, maintain political stability and increase national prestige. International studies were first introduced into the American higher education system because of the impact of societal factors and not because institutions deemed these studies to be inherently valuable (Obong, 1984). Through the years the United States has emerged as a major host nation to international students. This responsibility in the development of an international community via the medium of education has resulted in the expansion of international dimensions of American higher education. In the past decade, there has been a steady increase in international involvement by United States junior and community colleges (King, 1989).

There are many reasons that administrators in colleges and universities welcome international students and scholars. They express a belief in the universal value of education and seek to further international understanding and good will through the dissemination of knowledge. Proponents of higher learning recognize that education is not only a means of permitting students to pursue academic and personal goals, but also an instrument in the economic, social and political development of emerging countries. Hence, international students are considered a source of cultural diversity, enlightenment and revenue.

Educators, especially at junior and community colleges, are participating in activities designed to increase awareness and understanding of other countries on the part of students, faculty, and the community. Faculty and student exchange programs, cooperative relationships with foreign institutions and internationally focused curriculum offerings exemplify the interest in internationalizing the community college (King, 1990). To stress the mastery of foreign languages and knowledge of foreign cultures, a break in the stronghold of traditional disciplines in the curriculum is imperative (Atwell, 1990).

The difficulties faced by international students in the United States have

Ranjani Selvadurai is an associate professor, Department of Biological Sciences, New York City Technical College.

not changed drastically since the days of Kwame Nkrumah in 1930. Although the population of international students has grown dramatically, with over 2,500 institutions enrolling almost 300,000 students, the higher education community has shown little interest in the special needs of these students, or on the impact of such growth on the colleges and universities (Wray, 1981). Although the advantages of educational interchange would be considered of value by many in public policy making, there remain differences of opinion about institutional responsibilities to international students and students' obligations in return (Dalili, 1986). The National Association for Foreign Student Affairs (NAFSA) has been working to clarify standards for institutions to use in evaluating the adequacy of their services for international students.

Investigations have shown the difficulty of drawing any generalizations about the experiences of international students or of schools enrolling them. Some studies indicate that international students place greater emphasis on academic and professional goals than on nonacademic matters. International students in junior and community colleges frequently rate themselves lower than average in social and academic adjustment than do their counterparts in four-year colleges (Lee, 1981).

Research studies indicate that the first barrier encountered by international students is language. A majority of these students arrive from countries where English is not the first language. Although most international students are able to pass a standardized proficiency examination in English, they have difficulties functioning satisfactorily in an academic setting. International students' difficulties in understanding lectures, expressing ideas, and writing reports have been attributed to a lack of proficiency in English.

The National Association for Foreign Student Affairs (NAFSA, 1979) cautions on the reliability of standardized English proficiency examinations with reference to foreign students by stating:

It should be recognized that standardized tests are useful indicators, but they are less reliable and valid for students from other cultural and linguistic backgrounds than for students of the United States.

According to NAFSA, although English proficiency tests may be employed as an aid in the college admission process for foreign students, they should not be used as either the sole or the most important criterion in the selection of students for admission. In evaluating a foreign student's performance for admission to a college, a close coordination among the admissions officer, the teachers in the ESL program and the foreign student advisor is of paramount importance. Proficiency in spoken and written English is the greatest contributing factor towards the academic success of international students (Wray, 1981). Lee (1981) is of the opinion that self-perceived proficiency in English is a strong predictor of satisfaction in progress towards achieving goals as well as in facilitating coursework for foreign students.

Competency in English should not be the sole determining criterion for admission of international students to colleges. However, sufficient train-

ing in English must be offered to those who need it. An essential service for international students is the establishment of a variety of intensive English courses to be taken before or concurrently with the academic studies. Most educators, especially those in junior and community colleges, are making efforts to improve this service through English as a Second Language (ESL) programs. Many institutions that enroll relatively few foreign students would not find it economically feasible to provide such programs. For this reason some colleges have joined and established English language training programs in an effort to effectively service international students.

Studies by Hagey and Hagey (1974) reveal poor academic advisement as a major reason for failure to graduate on schedule. These studies indicate that without proper academic counseling international students have been misguided in many ways. Some have been placed in unsuitable programs of study while others have been placed in two-year colleges when they rightfully belonged at a four-year institution. Often such placements have complicated their academic sojourn with involved transfer processes. Inadequate counseling has contributed to poor academic performance and changing of majors by foreign students.

According to findings of the National Association of Foreign Student Affairs (1979), academic advisement, which may not be vital to academic success of native students, is crucial to that of foreign students. The association suggests that foreign students' academic progress be closely supervised throughout their stay in the United States. Rockland County Community College provides such a format. Each international student is under personal guidance of a faculty mentor. This mentor has knowledge and experience pertaining to the needs of international students, maintains a close contact with the students, and aids in designing a course of study related to the students' international career needs.

Many international students are faced with difficulties in adjusting to the style of American education (Stafford, 1980; Wray, 1981). Most of these students have received their early education on the model of the British or the French systems. Such educational systems, in contrast to the general education system of the United States, emphasize and gear for specialization. For example, under the British system a college student majoring in the sciences is required to take all science-related courses and not an array of nonscience electives. When such an international student has to face the diversified requirements of a general education in the United States, the sudden change in academic life often leads to apprehensions and confusion.

Classroom atmosphere and faculty-student rapport have also been reported by Craig (1981) and Edwards and Tonkin (1990) to cause certain difficulties for international students in the United States. Most international students are trained to listen to instructors rather than speak in class. Often the more collegial atmosphere maintained in the classroom in the college system in the United States may seem informal and less structured to international students, thus impeding their learning process. Western faculty-student relationships are based on expectations of mutual hon-

esty and respect. Many international students arrive with a respect for authority far surpassing that of their American peers. Faculty members should be sensitive to the presence of international students in their classes, especially when discussing political, cultural and geographical issues (Kaikai, 1989). Many adaptation problems of international students are relatively unknown to faculty in colleges of the United States. Hence, faculty development workshops and seminars should be arranged to increase understanding of international students and to develop supportive response patterns to them.

With reference to the evaluation process, international students are often not accustomed to frequent testing and have more experience taking essay-oriented examinations. The quick thinking required by multiple choice and short answer examinations has been reported to often create psychological barriers and tension among students. Research findings by Eddy (1979), Stafford (1980), Wray (1981) and Craig (1981) substantiate such factors as course structure, course content and academic standards as impediments in reaching the academic goals of international students in the United States.

The relevance of American curricula to international students' academic needs has been argued from several perspectives. Some argue that international students, although certainly welcome to study in the United States, should not expect the system to make accommodations for them. Those who support a policy of curriculum modification, on the other hand, argue that an institution with a high enrollment of international students has an obligation towards curriculum modification.

Research findings by Eddy (1979), and NAFSA (1979) indicate that economic problems loom large among personal difficulties experienced by international students in the United States. Self-help is nearly impossible for these students because of restrictions imposed by United States immigration laws. Although some students do obtain work permits, these are generally for noncampus jobs that often lead to competition with American students (Eddy, 1979). Most international graduate students find themselves in better financial situations than their undergraduate counterparts through scholarships, fellowships, and assistantships.

Admission of international students to American colleges and universities is contingent upon adequate financing. Although American colleges and universities often attempt to support their international student population financially, these attempts have been impeded by reduced financial support from the federal government, and from private and international agencies. Further, the pressures placed on institutions of higher education by minority group students, who often need financial aid, have reduced financial support to the international student clientele (Giammarella, 1986). Some colleges have organized work-student programs on campus, which are open to all students, including international students. Some international students have been successful in obtaining part-time positions in libraries, learning centers and as peer tutors. Some of these programs have somewhat helped to reduce their financial problems.

Acculturation is the adoption of another's culture as a result of contin-

ued contact with it. Acculturation for many international students involves the process of orientation to a new cultural environment and adjustment to different social patterns, which often present great difficulties. Understanding the American culture and adjusting to the temperate climate have created some problems for foreign students (Wray, 1981). Often these students are unaware of cultural differences in friendship building, dating etiquette and customs of Americans. Prejudice, impatience, religious and political attitudes on the part of both native and international students often interfere with socializing. Students of some nationalities have greater and different adaptation difficulties than others (Lee, 1981). According to Craig (1981), one of the factors contributing to these difficulties is the international students' legal status as aliens, thus implying to most native peers that they are transients in American society. International students frequently become dissatisfied and alienated because of feelings and attitudes emphasizing a lack of belonging.

Most international students arriving in the United States are from cultures with close family ties and distinct patterns of etiquette, food habits, and religious beliefs. A sudden exposure to a free and liberal culture with emphasis on independence may be quite a trauma to them. International students will have a positive academic and personal experience if they enjoy a satisfying contact with the host community. Eddy (1979), Diener (1980), Wray (1981), and Kaikai (1987) propose that the host family concept offers possibilities of a mutually rewarding relationship between the American family and the international student, giving them the opportunity to learn from one another. Traditionally, American families have been active in these programs. Today many single adults also serve as hosts to international students.

Institutions of higher education should assume the obligation of creating and maintaining a wholesome atmosphere that will create a mutual understanding between international and native students by establishing strong services to international students. This could be accomplished through campus friendship programs, international student clubs, international coffee hours, and social events with members of the community (Eddy 1979; Diener 1980).

Satisfying the needs of international students in a more effective manner will open avenues for increased enrollment of foreign students in American colleges. This in turn will increase the revenue to institutions at this time of financial constraints from other sources. A greater sensitivity towards the needs of international students will involve this group of students more completely and meaningfully in the American culture. In return they are expected to culturally and academically enrich American students. Tillman (1990) asserts that effective support services will serve more than short-term needs of international students. Such services will enhance learning from and about people beyond the borders of the immediate college community.

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