No Foreign Exchange Devalues Our Universities

By DAVID J. SKORTON and ROBIN L. DAVISSON

The American research university is a major engine of innovation in the U.S.'s knowledge economy and a critical element in economic competitiveness in our increasingly interdependent and globalized world. However, an insidious and significant threat to our innovation and competitiveness has recently become apparent: the loss of talent, temporary and permanent, due to a striking downturn in international students on American campuses.

For the past two years, and for the first time in decades, enrollments of international students in American universities have fallen, particularly from Asian countries. Recognizing that knowledge transcends nationality, recently we traveled to meet with the leaders of over a dozen universities in Southeast Asia, with particular emphasis on visits in Malaysia and Indonesia and with faculty, staff and students in Islamic institutions.

What did we find in our travels? First, skepticism about our mission. Some thought we were there to "set up shop" in their country, to siphon local funds into the American educational enterprise or to attract their students to the U.S., perhaps never to return to enrich the local economy. With surprising candor and openness, our hosts shared with us their frustrations, fears and uncertainties about the role America wishes to play in educational interchange in their world. Still, these same hosts emphasized the need for more, not less, intercultural exchange between our societies if a truly more secure world is a priority.

We emphasized the need for authentically bilateral exchange and explored concrete areas of education and research important to both cultures. In this context, it was gratifying to note the example of an effective research partnership between an anthropologist on our faculty and a geoscientist at a prestigious Indonesian university. Their investigations into early hominids in Java could not be done by either alone.

During the dialogue, the reasons for the downturn in international student enrollments
became clear to us, confirming and extending statements from the Association of American Universities and other organizations. First, strict U.S. visa regulations in the wake of September 11 are taking their toll. Second, international students believe they are not welcome in our country, or at least not as welcome as they were.

We heard chilling stories of personal searches and interrogation at U.S. airports. We experienced unusual scrutiny at a U.S. airport, presumably based on our destinations in Southeast Asia. Imagine how a young Islamic college student on her first trip to the U.S. must feel when pulled aside for an even closer inspection of her baggage or person. In response, the students are enrolling in universities in Australia, Europe and at home.

In the aftermath of 9/11, security is paramount, but governments must tackle the unenviable job of balancing "secure borders and open doors," to use the words of former Secretary of State Colin Powell. Given the reality of terrorism, is it important to do what is necessary to find this balance? Absolutely. We depend upon talented international students as partners in discovery.

In our own public research university in the American heartland, fully 50% of our graduate students in the physical and mathematical sciences and 25% of those in the biological sciences are international students, the majority from Asia. At a time of apparently declining interest in science and engineering among American students, we need these bright international students to sustain progress in research. Research drives innovation and innovation drives our economy, our national security and our future well-being.

At every university we visited in Southeast Asia, we found tremendous goodwill and a willingness to develop meaningful exchanges at student and faculty levels which we will endeavor to meet and reciprocate. An ambitious aspiration to be sure, but one that our country cannot fail to achieve if we are to reclaim our reputation as welcoming international visitors.

Coordinated action will be required by higher education associations, the federal government and the private sector, which is heavily dependent on innovation for economic growth. We urge our colleagues in universities nationwide to develop innovative, well-documented, mutually beneficial educational and research exchanges that will attract students from Asian cultures to the U.S. We urge the federal government to move even more assertively to facilitate access for international students to these exchanges.
For the sake of U.S. competitiveness, intercultural dialogue and understanding and, ultimately, a more secure world, we must not fail in this endeavor.

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