

Do you think like an “American”? - Difficult perspectives on internationalization programs.

BY: Stephen G. Wright

Is your approach to international partner institutions and international students based on business principles or human factors? Do you feel that a mutually beneficial contract is sufficient for creating a strong and definable bond between you? If you do, then I suggest that you do not understand international relationship management as well as you should. You believe you are doing the right things for all the right reasons. Yet, I must wonder if you are willing to question if you are, in fact, doing the right thing in practice?

A few months ago I was speaking with a colleague at a college in my state. He mentioned that they had gone through three directors of international programs in as many years. My response was a simple and direct statement: “You need to stop thinking like an American.” Consider the case of a U.S.-based school I was recently affiliated with. At an overseas campus, they used a curriculum and syllabi for their first-year orientation course at the extension campus that were the same as those used in the United States. It had not occurred to anyone that the course would lack any relevance or meaning for the overseas students.

Not long ago a friend who had recently retired from a company that is a U.S. government contractor told me about something that had occurred in West Africa. There was a need to move some SUVs from the port of entry to the capitol. As the regular drivers the company utilized were not available, a few local residents were hired to drive the vehicles to the capital. The cars arrived with many dents and in generally horrible condition. The on-site company representatives hustled the drivers into the office and demanded an explanation. According to my source, the drivers responded: “We cannot feed our children, we cannot afford to give them the clothes they need or the medical care and education they deserve – but you feel it is perfectly okay to bring your expensive new cars to our country just so that you can ride around in comfort!”

All that you consider to be common, ordinary, acceptable truths in the world may only be what you perceive to be as true around the world. The complaint that I hear most often while overseas is that people in the United States fail to understand the day-to-day lives of people in other nations. In view of this, program directors and faculty members at U.S. colleges and universities must be willing to change their assumptions by reassessing their perceptions!

International students and partners are not just a means for broadening your diversity profile. Your overseas students are not an income stream or an opportunity to extend institutional visibility via a “global foot print”! These are people with feelings, ideas, and concepts of living that may not always fit neatly into your world. Numerous articles I have read in the last year highlight the difficulties in adjustment that international students face when studying in the United States. Orientation and acculturation programs are not solely the answer to this problem. Does your acculturation course ask international students to understand your expectations? What about their perceptions, assumptions and expectations? Do you offer an orientation course for international students without a broadly based and active interaction/integration of U.S. students, faculty and staff?

In June of this year, Ms. Jacqueline Thomsen interviewed Reverend James Keenan of Boston College regarding university ethics for *Inside Higher Ed* (www.insidehighered.com/news). Rev. Keenan made reference to student / faculty interaction. While he may have been speaking about U.S. students and faculty, his point is relevant, in my view, to international student populations as well:

“We need constructive bridge building so that when students enter the classroom they are not entering a hermetically sealed academic universe where personal lives are not admitted or recognized. Similarly, student affairs needs to develop constructive ways of engaging faculty so that they might better appreciate the challenges that students encounter today.”

I suggest that all of your international student service staff must clearly understand the application of cross-cultural due diligence and be proficient in utilizing it as a foundation leading to cross-cultural fluency. If you genuinely want to create internationalization on your campus, you must be willing to challenge your perceptions regarding what is believed to be “universal” concepts or understandings. You will need to challenge yourself and be more open to discussion, compromise.

Here’s an idea: when your international students arrive, tell them that people in the United States tend to be insulated from the everyday lives of people from other nations. Then, ask them how people in the U.S. can become better global citizens. Role reversal may be difficult, but it is valuable sometimes.

The U.S. moral, ethical, academic or social compass may be worthy of world-wide discussion and evaluation. However, it lacks meaning or dignity when your view of the world is pressed upon others. Far better to demonstrate to your international partners and students the principles you promote by showing the same level of respect for their cultural norms and values as you require them to do for you while they are at your campus and community. Do you want to enjoy more sustained relationships with overseas partners and international students? Stop thinking like an “American”!

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