By Judie Jacobson

Notes filed from an American journalist on assignment overseas? No. Just some of the vivid images and impressions captured in e-mail from the university's own Sam Skinner '85, director of international admission, during 10 days in early spring when he visited several countries in Asia and the Middle East.

Historically, students in foreign countries who were interested in studying abroad and improving their English-language skills have looked to U.S. colleges and universities. "America has been the market leader for overseas degrees for a very long time," says Skinner. "The United States is the market leader because our university system has adapted to the changing needs of students. Unlike traditional public universities overseas, students in U.S. universities can study a broad number of subjects and move between degree programs. We emphasize effective teaching and active learning, which places greater demands on our professors but provides better experiences for students. In addition, U.S. higher education places great importance on practicality. Skill development is as important as theory, and students enjoy participating in internships and cooperative education programs. New private universities around the world are now developing programs that mimic the trademark features of the U.S. system.

As you might imagine, the recruitment of international students to study in the United States is strongly affected by changing world scenarios. A coup d'état or a plunging economy can make studying abroad completely out of the question.

Traveling first in Asia to South Korea, Japan, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, and then to Bahrain in the Persian Gulf, and Dubai and Abu Dhabi in the United Arab Emirates, Skinner found his work cut out for him.

The high cost of an American education is but one of the factors jeopardizing this country's position as the number-one destination for college-bound foreign students. A complicated, post-9/11 visa system is another. An aggressive marketing strategy on the part of Great Britain and Australia is yet another. "England and Australia in particular have done a great job of presenting a united front, marketing and selling their university systems abroad with special scholarship programs, a constant recruiting presence, and other incentives," says Skinner. As a result, he notes, "England and Australia have been chipping away at our lead."

It's not that the United States doesn't invest in international recruitment. "The difference lies in the level of funding and resources that our government allocates for that purpose," says Skinner. "In this country, each university works virtually on its own. When you walk into a U.S. college or university's advising office overseas, you often see tattered catalogs. But when you walk into a British or Aussie office, they're gleaming and high tech."

Ironically, the lack of support that the U.S. government gives to the recruitment of overseas students could have an unfortunate impact on the economy. "Most people don't realize that education is our country's sixth-largest service export," Skinner points out. "There are 500,000 international students studying in the United States. These students are not only paying tuition, they're paying all sorts of living expenses, and they're increasing the government's tax revenue." In fact, estimates by the U.S. Department of State place the total economic impact of international students at approximately $12.85 billion.

In addition, Skinner notes, "Someone who has studied in the U.S. is likely to be more positively disposed toward our country. Thus, as Secretary of State Colin Powell and others have pointed out, international students can provide a long-term diplomatic windfall for the United States."
Skinner notes that America’s continuing presence in Iraq and its position on the Israeli-Palestinian question have certainly affected the number of students from Arab countries who choose an American education. “We’re losing market share in the Middle East faster than anywhere else in the world,” says Skinner.

So what does Skinner see for the future of international recruiting? “To remain competitive, universities in this country will need to devote more resources to international recruitment. And the U.S. government needs to visibly demonstrate that we understand the value of having international students attend American universities. Evidence of this would be rethinking our visa process, for example.”

As for international recruiting at the University of Hartford? “The U.S. share of the international market is in decline. Some of this decline is due to the growth of private universities that are sprouting up like mushrooms around the world. Students simply have more choices. Our position on international recruitment is to work diligently to introduce ourselves to the segment of the international student market who can afford the cost of a private American university. We are using whatever means possible to have a consistent presence in our primary markets of Asia and India. That includes visits from admission personnel and faculty, mailings, and alumni support in their respective countries.

Despite all the obstacles, the University of Hartford remains a popular destination for international undergraduate and graduate students, especially in the areas of business, engineering, and music.

“We actively recruit foreign students,” says Skinner, who notes that with 353 students from 58 countries enrolled at the university last spring, our percentage of foreign students is well above the national average. Calling the school “internationally friendly,” he explains its appeal: “We are not overwhelmingly big, we have the right programs, and we are located in a region [New England] that has a strong reputation as a center for education.”

And then there is the faculty. “About 70 percent of our faculty have taught or conducted research overseas. That’s important, because it helps them to understand and assist students who are struggling in their classes. Many foreign alumni relate stories about individual faculty or staff who helped them through a rough patch. And satisfied alumni make invaluable school advocates.”