From the President

Closing the Distance

In August, like tens of millions of other people around the world, I thrilled to the televised opening ceremonies of the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games. I had, however, a new context in which to understand what I was seeing. Six weeks earlier I had traveled to Beijing and Jinan, China, with a University of Hartford delegation to initiate a series of faculty and student exchanges between a variety of Chinese universities and organizations and the University.

My exposure to China was far less grandiose than that of the athletes and spectators attending the Olympic Games. In many ways, however, my goal was the same: to increase understanding between our countries by learning more about each other.

This goal—bringing international students and faculty to the University of Hartford and sending American students and faculty abroad—has been part of the University’s mission since its founding, and it has been one of my highest goals since my arrival on campus 10 years ago. This past year, students from 64 countries studied at the University.

Nine years ago, in my very first column for the brand-new magazine version of the Observer, I reported on a trip I had made that summer to Asia and my enthusiasm for internationalizing the University.

I can now report that since becoming president, I have traveled to Turkey (three times), Jordan (twice), Israel (twice), China (twice), England, France, Germany, Dubai, Bahrain, Thailand, Taiwan, Malaysia, Japan, and Korea to visit alumni, recruit students, and establish international exchanges for students and faculty. After every trip, I return encouraged by the enthusiasm our international alumni show for the University and excited by the possibilities for future international initiatives.

This summer was no different. With other University representatives I made two trips—to Turkey and to China. In Turkey, where I visited with parents of current University students and alumni and worked to establish international exchanges, I was especially impressed by the enthusiasm of our alumni. We held two alumni events, one in Ankara and one in Istanbul. There is nothing quite like sipping a drink and glancing out a hotel window at the Bosphorus in the distance while listening to Turkish alumni discuss the best place in Hartford to get pizza!

In China my mission was different: I went with a University delegation and Connecticut’s commissioner of education, Mark McQuillan, to establish exchanges at both K–12 and university levels. We returned from that trip having signed agreements with the Shandong University of Finance for Chinese students to study at the Barney School of Business and with the China Educational Agency for International Exchange—agreements that I am confident will result in significantly more Chinese students coming to the University to study as undergraduates.

I felt especially fortunate to sit in with Commissioner McQuillan as he met with a number of senior Chinese education officials to discuss the comparative strengths and weaknesses of the Chinese and American public education systems. One meeting in Shandong province particularly sticks in my memory. Our issues in America, especially in our poorer communities, McQuillan said, are that families are not engaged in their children’s education, that our school year is too short, and that not enough students study math and science. On the contrary, the Chinese officials said, in China parents are too involved with their children’s education, the school year is too long, and too many students want to study math and science. Education officials from both countries decided that Chinese students are too disciplined and not creative enough, while American students are undisciplined and too creative. It appears that we have much to learn from each other.

In bringing more international students to the University, we can learn about both our similarities and our differences. Two examples at the University currently illustrate exactly what I have in mind. Last year, under the direction of David Pines, associate professor of civil engineering, a group of our students traveled...
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—Walter Harrison, President

under the auspices of Engineers Without Borders to install a solar well in a village in rural India that previously did not have reliable access to clean drinking water. A new group of students will take on a new project, perhaps two new projects, in the coming year. And thanks to the leadership of Pines’s colleague, Associate Professor Saleh Keshawarz, and a grant from the World Bank, 11 faculty members from Herat University in Afghanistan are currently attending the University to earn graduate degrees that will enable them to upgrade the engineering education available in that western Afghanistan city.

If America is to preserve her place as a leader of world nations, I believe we must significantly increase the numbers of international students studying here and American students studying abroad. I believe so strongly in the American ideals of freedom, democracy, and capitalism that I am convinced that international students who study here will return home with an increased respect for America and that for which we stand. I am similarly convinced that as American students increasingly study abroad, they will return home not only with increased knowledge of other countries and cultures but also with an increased appreciation for our culture and ideals.

I say this based on experience: over 30 years ago I spent a year as a graduate student in Germany. Today I continue to have warm memories of German culture and strong memories of how much more I appreciated American ideals when I returned.

What I want is nothing less for our students. It is a vital goal for our University, our country, and our world.