From the President

At a time in our national history when concerns about the war in Iraq threaten to make the United States more insular than ever, news stories about decreasing international enrollments at American universities are very worrisome to those of us in higher education. Although the number of new international students was up marginally last year, the total number of students from other countries enrolled in American universities was down by 2 percent. This decline has been evident ever since the tragic events of Sept. 11, 2001, and I believe it is a matter of national concern.

International enrollments at the University of Hartford have declined each year for the past nine years, and this fact is a matter of concern for me and for the leadership of the university. Before I discuss our plans to reverse this trend, let me explain why I believe attracting international students to American universities and sending American students abroad should be a top national educational priority.
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The United States of America has been, since the fall of communism in Eastern Europe and the breakup of the Soviet Union in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the strongest military and economic power on earth. With that strength, in my opinion, we have assumed an important responsibility: to work steadfastly for American values of freedom, individual dignity, and human rights and to promote democracy and free inquiry around the globe.

In his remarks prior to receiving the Nobel Prize in December 2005, British playwright Harold Pinter criticized this view as an unwarranted attempt by the United States to impose its power on the rest of the world. I don't see it as such. Every nation and every culture should be free to adopt any system it feels is appropriate, but everyone benefits when countries understand our systems, values, and cultures, and we understand theirs.

For many decades now, American higher education has been the envy of the world, one of the dwindling number of industries (if you want to consider education an industry) in which the United States is undoubtedly number one. Hundreds of thousands of students are drawn to our colleges and universities. They return home not only better educated but also with a much stronger understanding of American values and culture. And since well-educated students more often than not become leaders of their societies, we can only benefit if they do so with a much better understanding of our way of life.

Since these students, their families, their countries, or—in some cases, international agencies—pay tuition, there is also a strong economic benefit for American colleges and universities, and also for our country. Other countries have recognized this financial outcome over the past 20 years and have made notable efforts to increase the market share for their colleges and universities. The United Kingdom and Australia, for example, subsidize the education of international students who come to their countries. The last decade has seen major “university building” in Persian Gulf states like Qatar and Dubai as well. At the same time, concerns with national security (not unfounded concerns, but sometimes clumsily adopted and administered) in this country have made it more difficult for international students to come here.

I am pleased to say that several national initiatives are under way to increase the number of international students studying in this country. And we at the University of Hartford are now adopting initiatives of our own.

This year 340 international students (evenly divided between undergraduate and graduate students) are studying at the university. They come from 60 countries, with the top six being India, Turkey, Canada, Japan, Korea, and Taiwan. These students enrich the university’s culture immensely, and many of them graduate at or near the top of their classes.

In recent years we have developed exchanges or partnerships with universities, colleges, and schools in Jordan, Turkey, Germany, and Israel, among other countries. A new national initiative with Saudi Arabia has already brought us a dozen Saudi students this year, with the real promise of many more in the immediate future. We are currently working on a major initiative in India with Lord Swraj Paul, the leading Anglo-Indian industrialist to whom we gave an honorary degree in 2002.

At the same time, more and more American students are choosing to study abroad, a healthy demonstration that they understand the importance of living and studying in a different culture. Their number has doubled in the past decade, and a recent national initiative known as the Abraham Lincoln Study Abroad Fellowship Program has called for a goal of 1 million American students studying abroad each year.

At the University of Hartford we have a much more modest goal. This past year, 139 university students studied abroad; we hope to double that number in the next five years. Our study abroad office is very active, and our faculty offer a variety of fascinating short courses abroad. Hartford School theatre students study in England; Hartford Art School students study painting in Sicily; Hillayer College honors students study in countries that range from England to Mexico; and the Greenberg Center for Judaic Studies regularly takes students to study archaeology and photography in Israel.

Not only do we need to create more programs of this sort, but we also need to understand the barriers—financial, social, or cultural—that prevent our students from studying abroad. While we bring a representative number of international students to our campus, we trail the leading universities to which we compare ourselves in the number of our American students who study abroad.

At the center of all this initiative is our International Center, under the energetic and creative leadership of Dean Catherine Stevenson. Located in Gengras Student Union, the center is a beehive of activity. Richard Lazzarini, the associate director (to whom I always turn for advice about the dizzying world of immigration requirements), and staffers Hikmet Aslan and Sarah Reuter (who heads the study abroad office)—as well as a wonderful group of graduate students—manage a wide array of activities and programs. I’d match them up with any such center in the country for efficiency and friendliness.

Encouraging international education and understanding is an important part of our mission as a university and has been since our founding. It is also a major part of our role as a leading American university. At the University of Hartford, we are committed to stepping up to the task ahead. In my view, a great deal of our nation’s future depends on what we and other American universities—with the help and encouragement of our government—can do. ■

Walter Harrison