

The “Chinese Strategy” Poses Problems for U.S. Universities

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It is no secret that U.S. universities are struggling to pay their bills. Endowments have shrunk due to stock market reverses. Money remaining in the coffers earns a measly interest rate that contributes negligibly to day-by-day expenses. To make matters worse, student loans have been dramatically curtailed in many states, often due to abuses by store front colleges whose primary income source is government student loans given to students who frequently drop out of school within the first semester. Finally, parents find it more difficult to cough up the \$40,000 or more required per year for most private colleges, including my own, because home equity loans and other sources of financing are harder to acquire in an economic environment of dipping home values.

Enter the “China strategy”. Mainland Chinese students take the gaokao examination at the end of their secondary schooling or, in Hong Kong and the New Territories, the JUPAS examination. If they place roughly in the top 17 percent, they are given a free ride at one of China’s increasingly prestigious universities. If not, they must seek out tertiary education at one of China’s vocational institutions or more obscure universities. Wealthy Chinese families resolve this dilemma by sending, in effect, their “B-” students (as measured by test scores) to U.S. universities. (This generalization is not meant to slight the many superb Chinese students who choose U.S. universities.). Chinese students come with cash in hand for full tuition without need of university aid and are welcomed accordingly by financially-strapped institutions.

My own institution, for example, has just admitted a 2012 freshman class consisting of 47 percent international students, almost all from

mainland China. The vast majority of these freshmen are sorely lacking in English proficiency, as measured by TOEFL scores. While this Chinese influx can be justified on the grounds of student diversity, it poses practical problems in the classroom. For quite understandable reasons, Chinese students raised in the “sage on the stage” Chinese educational environment don’t participate much in U.S. class discussion. Many are unable to contribute to writing tasks on student teams and appear shy and tongue-tied in student presentations. Domestic students are thus left with the dilemma of “doing all the work” on such teams to preserve their own grades. Retention of Chinese students becomes a problem, as they realize they could have studied in a heavily Chinese environment without coming to the U.S. Domestic students leave because they resent a university experience in which they are de facto tutors and academic life-savers to their English-deficient international classmates.

The solution to this common problem, I believe, lies in appropriate (and often expensive) support services for both Chinese students who need to learn English and the expected behaviors of the American classroom as well as domestic students who need to learn how to interact productively with international students. If we have our hand out to Chinese students to rescue our university budgets, we have the moral obligation to devote a significant portion of their tuition infusion to innovative programs that integrate them socially and academically into the American academic experience. Lacking such programs, the balance tips toward student and faculty dissatisfaction when half the class can’t write a paragraph of cogent and correct English, opts not to participate in class discussions, and is unable to pull its weight in the work of student teams that include domestic students.

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