

# Trends & Insights

NAFSA: ASSOCIATION OF INTERNATIONAL EDUCATORS

JANUARY 2017

## Removing the Blinders: Neo-Racism and International Students

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The Institute of International Education (IIE) recently released its *Open Doors* report, indicating that more than 1 million international students are enrolled in U.S. colleges and universities (IIE 2016). Whether the trend will continue on an upward path or not remains uncertain. The forecast is unclear because enrollment counts do not tell us how many current international students feel safe and supported. Nor can they predict if students will be satisfied with their decision to study in the United States or how many more (or less) will apply in the future, particularly in the aftermath of the U.S. presidential election. President Trump's campaign proposals included a temporary ban on Muslims, limits on visitors from the Middle East, and more scrutiny for visa applicants from particular regions. His rhetoric remains heavy with anti-immigrant sentiments based on a protectionist view of the United States. Subsequent events may further shape perceptions of security and support among international students and consequently shift enrollment numbers.

Immigrants, including international students, are a vulnerable population in the United States. One month following the U.S. election results, the Southern Poverty Law Center's (SPLC) website reported more than 1,000 incidents of election-related harassment and intimidation across the United States, with anti-immigrant incidents the most reported, followed by anti-black and anti-Muslim (SPLC 2016). The same report indicated that these incidents occurred most often in K-12 schools, followed by business establishments and universities. The SPLC further observed that "white nationalist 'alt-right' figureheads like Richard Spencer and Milo Yiannopolous [are] touring college campuses..., where the 'movement' hopes to build its numbers." While the SPLC (2016) acknowledges that some reports might be anecdotal and the exact numbers are difficult to verify, we can reasonably assume many of the reported incidents were real.

For example, on October 30, 2016, Hussain Saeed Alnahdi, a University of Wisconsin-Stout international

student from Saudi Arabia was brutally assaulted. The next day, he died from his injuries. The exact circumstances of his death remain unknown but many speculate the incident was a hate crime because of Alnahdi's ethnicity and religion. As Christine Hauser reported on November 3, 2016, in the *New York Times*, the university's "9,600 students include a tight-knit group of 142 from Saudi Arabia," and "anxious parents in Saudi Arabia have warned their children studying at the university to be careful, and to leave home only for classes." It is no wonder, as Elizabeth Redden reported in a November 10, 2016, article in *Inside Higher Ed*, that international educators and officials are concerned about the United States' ability to recruit future students from abroad.

Whether the number of international students in the United States grows or drops, enrollment figures should not serve as blinders to students' experiences upon registration. The challenges associated with international study are not recent, nor are they solely an issue

in the United States. News reports and research studies have long reported the problems international students encounter in studying in the United States (see Hail 2015, Lee and Rice 2007) and abroad (see Lee, Jon, and Byun 2016; Marginson, Nyland, Sawir, and Forbes-Mewett 2010). A considerable degree of their hardships stem from language and being away from the familiarities of home, resulting in loneliness, homesickness, and cultural adjustment, such as differing perceptions of time, communication styles, and food preferences.

Beyond overcoming the usual relocation challenges, however, there is also evidence that an unwelcome host environment makes it especially difficult for international students to succeed. Over the past decade, my colleagues and I have identified a range of discriminatory incidents in different parts of the world. Based on surveys and interviews from international students in the United States, Mexico, South Korea, and South Africa, we uncovered host-derived challenges, such as feeling excluded in peer activities, lacking educational opportunities outside of class (i.e., teaching, research, and other academic part-time jobs), feeling misunderstood or negatively stereotyped by their peers and instructors, as well as more direct confrontations in the forms of sexual harassment, verbal assault, and physical attack (Lee and Rice 2007; Lee, Jon, and Byun 2015; Lee in press).

Our research suggests that such prejudice does not stem from generalized xenophobia but rather from targeted neo-racism against those from particular regions of the world. In the case of the United States, we have found that students from Latin American, African, and Asian countries reported considerably greater challenges both in and out of the classroom compared with those from European countries, Canada, and Australia. Whereas racism is largely attributable to the color of one's skin, neo-racism suggests prejudice that is seemingly justifiable on cultural superiority rather than biological racism alone. Based on the concept of neo-racism, a Chinese student, for example, would encounter more difficulties than a Chinese-American due to negative stereotypes associated with being a Chinese national. In short, immigration status and race matter.

Of course, not all minoritized international students experience neo-racism, much like not all minoritized individuals experience racism. Nor is neo-racism equally present in all locations. Institutional and local

community contexts differ widely. But colleges and universities in all locations should be keenly aware of the greater discriminatory challenges for our international students of color, who comprise the majority of international students in the United States. They should also be attuned to how quickly perceptions of belonging, safety, and security can change.

In addition to the ongoing adjustment challenges and potential discrimination, it is likely that the current political climate will exacerbate neo-racism in the United States and have negative implications for future enrollment. Prior to the U.S. presidential election, research indicated that 60 percent of international students reported they would be less inclined to pursue study in the United States if Trump was elected president (Waxman 2016). A November 2016 article by Karin Fischer in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* noted that with one out of three international students coming from China, such a massive drop would be devastating to international education, including the universities that rely heavily on international student tuition and fees. Declining enrollment from other leading sending countries (India, Saudi Arabia, and South Korea) could also have serious implications for the U.S. role in international education globally.

U.S. colleges and universities have the important responsibility of assuring international students that their campuses are safe and combating potential neo-racism in the future. But in order to do so, there must be a willingness to hear from current students directly. For the past decade, I have been partnering with universities in surveying and interviewing international students in the United States and abroad. The data we have collected have been very useful in informing recruitment strategies and examining the conditions for improving students' transition and success. Targeted efforts have included educating faculty and administrators across campus on their institutional survey results, meeting and partnering with international student clubs, socializing instructors in creating inclusive classroom environments, and educating international students on their rights.

While past research and reports offer universal strategies and advice, one size does not fit all. Surrounding communities, student demographics, and resources differ widely. Moreover, an assessment process is not just identifying quick-fix solutions, but building

trusting relationships with our international students. My research has also suggested that many negative incidents are left unreported as some international students privately confided fears of retaliation and being deported (Lee and Rice 2007; Lee, forthcoming). An openness to learn, such as through confidential evaluations, can be a helpful starting point for future dialogue and working together in ensuring a safe, secure, and thriving academic environment.

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