

Educating International Students About 'Race'

U.S. NEWSPAPERS FREQUENTLY REFER TO BARACK OBAMA as “the first black president” of the United States. But observers from overseas, including foreign students and scholars, may quickly note that Obama’s mother was white. Why, they may wonder, is Obama considered black? Couldn’t he also be considered white?

The answer to these questions lies in America’s peculiar race-relations history.

Nearly all the countries in the world, including the United States, are racially heterogeneous. Different countries have attempted to deal with racial differences in different ways, ranging from genocide to the embrace of “multiracialism” or “multiculturalism.” Each country has its own idiosyncratic race-relations history.

Consequently, students coming to the United States have their own ideas about racial differences. When they get to the United States, they will encounter a new set of attitudes and practices regarding those differences, whether or not they themselves are members of what Americans consider a racial minority group.

What, if anything, do U.S. international student offices do to help foreign students understand race relations in the United States? Not much, at least not directly, according to many advisers. Many international student offices address the general issue of intercultural relations, without a particular focus on race relations. It is usually other offices, with names such as “multicultural affairs,” that address race issues. The international student office may co-sponsor or otherwise support these activities.

Initial Steps

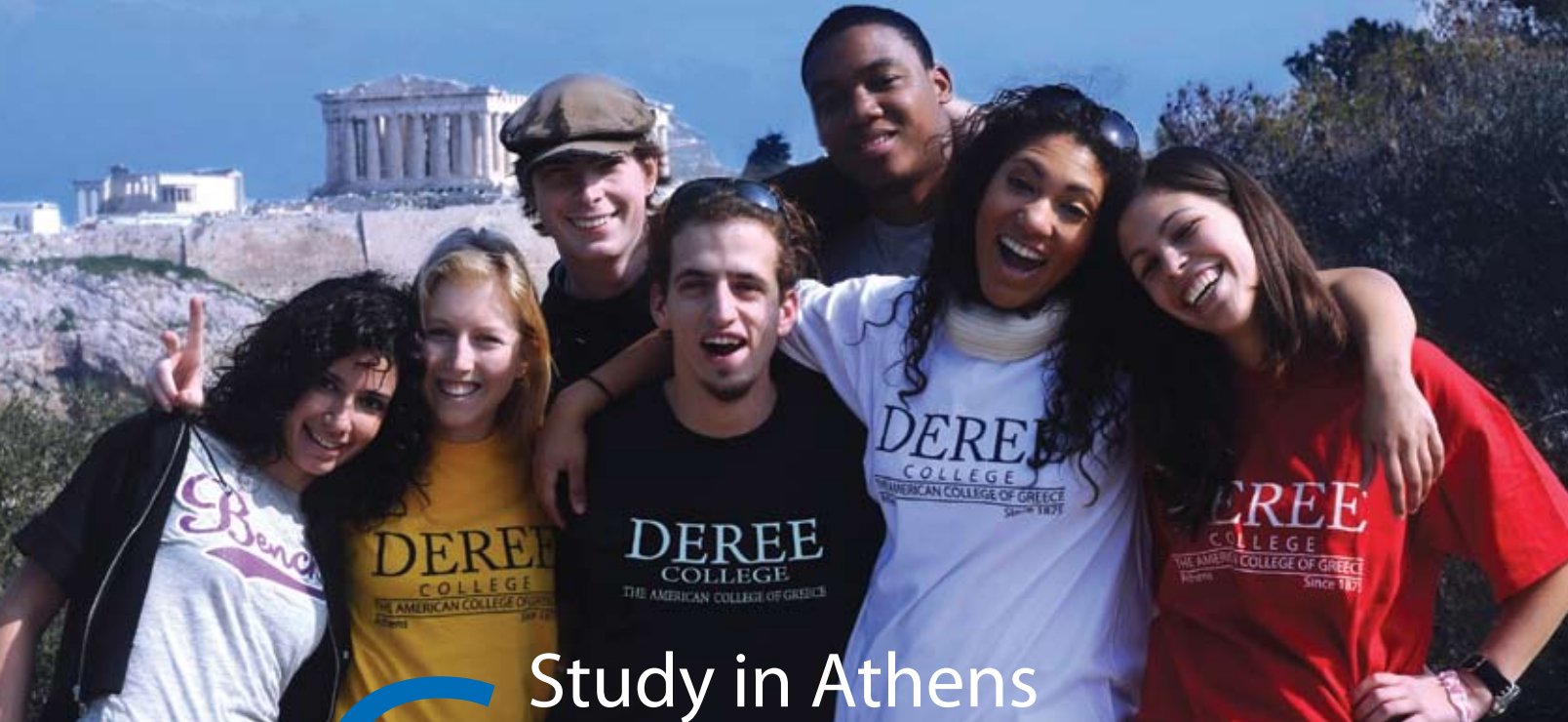
Among those international student offices that do make efforts to educate international students about race relations in the United States, there are a number of approaches. Central Connecticut State University’s international student office touches upon racial issues in the context of cultural differences. Toyin Ayeni, international student and scholar services coordinator says that during orientation, “rather than talk specifically on race, we enlighten the students on differences that exist among cultures.” A faculty member with considerable international experience discusses many manifestations of cultural difference, and also “talks about race with more emphasis on cultural differences.”

Christie Ward, associate director of CCSU’s Muirhead Center for International Education and coordinator of the intensive English language program, says English as a Second Language (ESL) classes are the main venue for discussing race relations in the United States. Teachers use films and essays to encourage conversation about racial matters. “We try to help our students understand the diversity of the United States, its history, and the challenges that the country has faced in trying to realize the value of human rights for all,” she says.

In their orientation program and student handbook, Oklahoma State University’s International Students and



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Scholars Office seeks to convey the message “tolerance towards all people, regardless of race, gender, etc., is expected,” says Tim Huff, the office’s manager. His office uses materials that relate to cultural differences in general, rather than race relations more specifically. “We are not quite there yet,” he says, but it is “where we need to be going.”

During its orientation for ESL students, Gonzaga University’s intercultural relations specialist has introduced the topic of race relations with a presentation on African American history, according to Melissa Heid, international student program assistant. The students then have an opportunity to ask about race-relations matters.

Through their orientation and other programs, Webster University tries to make the point that “Race is a very complex topic in this country,” says Director of International Services Bert Barry. “[Our] goal is cross-cultural understanding and, ultimately, harmony, but that goal is far from being realized. The only reason Webster University’s orientation program deals a bit more explicitly with race than others may be that orientation is the responsibility of the Office of Multicultural and International Student Affairs. Because that office works with U.S. students from a variety of different ethnic backgrounds, the staff is more sensitive to racial issues.”

Location Matters

Oftentimes, the likelihood of an institution providing some overview of race relations in the United States to assist international students in

the acculturation process is influenced by the demographic makeup of the city in which the institution is located. Take, for example, the largest community college in the country—Miami Dade College.

“In our orientation meetings we certainly stress the multiculturalism of the Miami area,” says Dariusz Baran, program leader in International Student Services at Miami Dade College’s Homestead Campus, “but we really do not stress the issue of race specifically.” He adds, “I think, however, that we should, especially for students coming from some countries in Asia. We have noticed that for some Chinese [and] Japanese students, the diversity in Miami is a little shocking.”

Toshie Baba, associate director of international admissions and advising at Golden Gate University in San Francisco, says his office has no special programs or materials on race relations for foreign students “because San Francisco has a very diverse population and the Golden Gate University International Admissions and [the] Advising Office [staffs are] racially diverse. We do one-on-one advising for students who may have questions on racial issues.”

Bob Ericksen, director of the Dashew Center for International Students and Scholars at the University of California Los Angeles agrees. “As a majority-minority campus, we are rich on a daily basis with programming on race-related issues and topics through many other campus offices, many of which collaborate directly with us,” he says. “If we were in a different place with a different student profile, we might have a very different approach.”

In the South, the approach is different. Brenda Hinson, director of international student services and admissions at the University of South Alabama, says her office does not address the topic of race in its programs or materials. “Here in the South we spend so much time trying to overcome our past images that we wait till [foreign students] arrive and answer questions they might have about race at that time,” she explains.

Acknowledging that his institution has a well-documented racial history from the era of segregation in the South, Director Michael Johansson of the Office of International Programs at the University of Mississippi cites a number of campus-wide programs that are intended to “promote not just racial tolerance, but racial harmony.” Among these are the following:

- The Planet Partner program, which brings pairs of international and domestic students together in a variety of organized activities, such as roller skating, a hayrack ride, and a party for new students. In addition, the students engage in activities of their own choosing.
- Omazing Race, based on a television show. Local and international students take part in competitions that require cooperation.
- Support the One Mississippi, “a student-led multiracial, multicultural campus organization that holds workshops, events, and weekend retreats to promote racial and cultural understanding.”

Different Needs of International Undergraduate vs. Graduate Students

Some institutions only see the need to address race relations issues for undergraduate students. Tuft University’s International Center discusses race in its orientation for new undergraduate international



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al students, but not for graduate students. "They [graduate students] do not have the issue of race on their radar screens," says Director Jane Etish-Andrews. "They are only interested in doing well academically and do not want to address issues that are outside of their academic performance."

The International Center at Tufts trains student "host advisers" for the undergraduate orientation program. Diversity is among the many topics addressed in the training.

Tufts has a program called "Many Stories: One Community," aimed at first-year undergraduate students. A panel of upper-class students, including some from other countries, addresses an array of topics related to their Tufts experience. Race relations is one of those topics.

Jill Townley, coordinator of international student life at Portland State University mentions several venues where the topic of race relations is addressed on her campus. The topic of race relations is mentioned briefly in a continuing orientation session on safety. "The topic seems germane there," Townley says, "because there is some indication that Asian female foreign students in Portland are targets of theft."

Also, events co-sponsored by the Organization of International Students and the Multicultural Center host events in which students discuss "what it means to be a minority student at PSU and issues around second- and third-generation immigrants.... [T]opics include race and religion, race and stereotyping, race and the cultural adjustment process, and race or cultural stereotypes and norms around dating." Other programs at Portland State—the International Student Mentor Program and the Intercultural Leadership Workshop—also explore race relations.

Michigan State University offers another example of a cooperative effort that does not directly involve the international student office. Peter Briggs, director of the Office for International Students and Scholars, says MSU cooperates with the local community on an annual "One Book, One Community Program." The selected book is used in all freshman writing programs, Briggs says. The public library organizes

discussions about the book, as does MSU's Department of Student Life, which encourages international student participation. Some of the books deal with racial issues, such as Susan Carol McCarthy's *Lay That Trumpet in Our Hands*, an account of the civil rights movement as it emerged in communities across the United States.

Courses for Credit Help Students Understand Race Relations

The University of Michigan has what some might consider the ideal situation for helping students learn about racial issues: credit-bearing courses on an array of intergroup relationships. The courses fall under the rubric of the Program on Intergroup Relations. IGR, as it is known, offers dialogue groups on such topics as race and ethnicity, U.S. and international students, race and ethnicity among women, multi-racial identity, and many others. Dialogue groups include five to seven representatives of each category of participants, and are led by trained facilitators. "The goal of these dialogues is to bring the two student groups together in a space for understanding one another," says Jennifer Yim, director of the Global Scholars Pilot Program, a component of IGR (for more information about IGR, visit <http://www.igr.umich.edu>).

"We support the work of IGR and co-sponsor programs with them and with Multi-Ethnic Student Affairs [MESA]," says John Greisberger, director of the University of Michigan-Ann Arbor International Center. "They have much more expertise in this area than we [do], and it's a good collaborative effort. Race relations/intergroup relations is one of those areas where I feel much more comfortable involving others on campus who deal with these issues all of the time."

IGR, MESA, and other Michigan offices have offered workshops relating to the African International/African American diaspora and the Asian International/Asian American diaspora.

Though some areas have been cited as the most troublesome for to foreign students with regard to race in the United States, not

all advisers agree on which issues are the most problematic.

For example, Bert Barry of Webster University thinks the most troublesome area is "the perception that the dominant white culture is inherently 'right.' Too often [the international] students are only interested in associating with people from their home country and U.S. whites. They shun blacks, Hispanics, and all other minority groups."

"International students do not have a problem as a general rule with race issues," says Tim Huff, manager of international students and scholars at Oklahoma State University-Stillwater. "There are more than 100 countries represented by international students at OSU and they are more tolerant on race issues than American students. Most international students," he goes on, "already consider themselves another race and are thus quite empathetic towards other international and minority students." He adds, "I do not believe that the same can be said of the American student perception of international students."

Tuft's Jane Etish-Andrews explains that there is a learning curve among international students when it comes to understanding race relations. "At first, incoming students do not have a good understanding of the issues of race in the U.S. They think that because they come from countries where different races mix that it is no different than it is back at home. Many students do not understand the issue of race and oppression in their own countries and societies. This is especially true for affluent undergraduate students coming to study at Tufts," she says.

"Understanding the impact that the legacy of slavery has had on American life can be a challenge" for some students, observes Christie Ward, director of the intensive English language program at Central Connecticut University. "Also, often our Asian students are surprised to discover that Asian Americans are seldom included when discussing racial issues in the United States, and that Asian Americans are underrepresented by the media, etc."

Portland State's Jill Townley says the issue of race "becomes real ... when international

students are mistaken for a ethnic minority groups in the U.S. and treated as such," for example when "African students [are] treated like African-Americans [or] students from [the] Middle East and South America [are] taken for Mexican immigrants."

In her work with multicultural student programs, she says, "Often there is a disconnect—stereotyping or racism that arises between [for example] U.S.-born Indian students and international students from India who may be working on an Indian Student Association event. This is often an area [where] the international students least expect racism to occur, from someone with the same cultural background who has only lived in the U.S."

Generally speaking, some factors that appear to affect the international student office role in helping students from abroad understand race relations in the United States include the following:

- the level of diversity on the campus and in the surrounding community;
- the area's race-relations history;
- the school's size—and thus the presence or absence of specialized student-services offices; and
- the presence or absence of an office charged with dealing with intergroup matters, and the nature of the relationship between such offices (if they exist) and the international student office.

Of course, an international student office's role in educating international students about U.S. race relations varies from institution to institution, but most advisers agree that learning about race is an important part of understanding culture in the United States. Most importantly, international student advisers do what they can—either within their own offices or by working with multicultural affairs offices—to ensure that international students have an opportunity to learn about race relations in the United States so they can better adjust to life in this next stage of their lives. **IE**

GARY ALTHEN, a former NAFSA president, is the author of *American Ways: A Guide for Foreigners in the United States* and an occasional contributor to *International Educator*.

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