

CONNECTION

THE JOURNAL OF THE NEW ENGLAND BOARD OF HIGHER EDUCATION

CONNECTION: THE JOURNAL OF THE NEW ENGLAND BOARD OF HIGHER EDUCATION is published five times a year by the New England Board of Higher Education, 45 Temple Place, Boston, MA 02111-1325
Phone: 617.357.9620 Fax: 617.338.1577
Email: connection@nebhe.org

Vol. XXI, No. 2 Fall 2006
ISSN 0895-6405

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Publisher: Evan S. Dobbelle

Executive Editor: John O. Harney

Senior Director of Communications:

Charlotte Stratton

Design and Production: tpgcreative, Boston, MA

Back Issues: Back issues of CONNECTION are accessible on the World Wide Web at www.nebhe.org/connectionarchives. Hard copies of regular issues may be purchased from NEBHE for \$3.95 each; annual directory issue, \$20.

For advertising information, contact Charlotte Stratton at cstratton@nebhe.org.

CONNECTION is printed in New England.

CONNECTION is indexed and abstracted in EBSCOhost's Academic Search Elite, Academic Search Premier and Professional Development Collection, and indexed in the MLA International Bibliography and ERIC's Current Index to Journals in Education.

The New England Board of Higher Education is a nonprofit, congressionally authorized, interstate agency whose mission is to promote greater educational opportunities and services for the residents of New England. NEBHE was established by the New England Higher Education Compact, a 1955 agreement among the states of Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island and Vermont.



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EDITOR'S MEMO

An International Strategy

Memo to Washington: there's a better way to spread democracy around the world ... and boost America's economic competitiveness at the same time. It's a strategy built on college campuses rather than battlefields, and New England has a big role to play.

The keys to this strategy are to aggressively recruit foreign students of all backgrounds to U.S. colleges and universities, expand and diversify study abroad among U.S. college students, and heighten international awareness among all citizens, in part by harnessing the cultural resource of America's growing immigrant populations.

The national professional group called NAFSA: Association of International Educators explained very succinctly in a recent statement why a comprehensive national policy on international education is needed now more than ever:

"First, globalization has reached a point where the United States cannot expect to retain its competitive edge if its workforce lacks strong international and cross-cultural knowledge and skills. Second, as September 11 tragically but forcefully reminded us, it is still as important as it was during the Cold War to understand a dangerous world, to speak the world's languages, and to promote better understanding of the United States by the world's citizens."

NAFSA observed further that "leaders of friendly countries in the Middle East worry about a 'lost generation' of future Arab leaders who will not be educated in the United States because of post-September 11 visa issues. ... These leaders understand that exchange relationships sustain political relationships; if one atrophies, sooner or later the other will too." International students who have spent time on U.S. campuses, NAFSA concludes, are "perhaps our most underrated foreign policy asset."

For New England, where the native college-age population is barely growing, the stakes are particularly high, but so is the potential to turn things around.

Worldwide, 2.5 million college students studied outside their home countries last year, up more than 40 percent from five years earlier, according to UNESCO. But the share of international students choosing U.S. campuses has declined, due in part to post-9/11 visa restrictions and steady growth in quality higher education options elsewhere. New England's piece of the U.S. share, though still disproportionately large, has also been shrinking. Fortunately, the region has some competitive cards to play in this regard.

First, New England's reputation for tolerance should be a major selling point in an age when the possibility of encountering bigotry and harassment are real considerations in the college choices of international students. Any "brand" New England develops to market itself abroad should draw liberally on the region's history of openness and progressive thinking from the Revolution through Abolition to gay rights.

Second, New England's knack for innovation in the student financial aid field could help the region attract a new breed of international student. About two-thirds of foreign students in the United States currently pay for college with their own funds, according to the Institute of International Education—good for the ruling classes but not so good for the world's faster growing lower and middle classes. As veteran student loan innovator Tom Parker notes, "a cross-national student loan program could democratize and expand international student enrollment in the way that the early guaranteed student loan program expanded college opportunity for U.S. students." New grant programs for international students are also needed.

Third, New England organizations from Rhode Island's Glimpse Foundation to Vermont's School for International Training are dedicated to dramatically expanding study abroad experiences for U.S. students. Today, a paltry 1 percent of U.S. college students, most of them white, study overseas, mostly in a handful of Western European countries. New England's corporate human resource professionals could help on the demand side by placing more value on study abroad experiences when making hiring decisions.

Finally, as immigrant education advocate Marcia Drew Hohn observes, New England has a key asset that is too-often overlooked in the shift to globalization: the region's 1.4 million foreign immigrants. These *new* New Englanders—if they are embraced and afforded full educational opportunities—can help provide their longer established neighbors with "the intercultural exposure and international savvy needed to compete in the global economy." Internationalization, oddly enough, begins at home.

John O. Harney is executive editor of Connection. Email: jharney@nebhe.org.