

DIP KIDS FILL VOID AT U.S. COLLEGES

AMERICAN UNIVERSITIES ARE INCREASINGLY LOOKING TO YOUTH WHO GREW UP OVERSEAS TO MAINTAIN THE INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE INSIDE THEIR CLASSROOMS.

BY ANTJE SCHIFFLER

The number of international students at U.S. universities decreased by 2.4 percent in the fall of 2003, ending a period of continuous growth, according to a recent study by the Institute of International Education. Undergraduate enrollment dropped by a troubling 5 percent, though enrollment at graduate schools rose by 5 percent, the institute found. Experts attribute the drop in undergrad enrollment to real and perceived difficulties in obtaining visas, as well as to rising tuition costs and enhanced recruitment efforts by other English-speaking countries.

Confronted with this trend, American universities are now eyeing another group to maintain the international perspective inside the classroom: Third Culture Kids, also known as Global Nomads. TCKs and GNs are students who spent a significant part of their childhood abroad due to their parents' professions. They are a diverse group that includes children of diplomats, businesspeople, missionaries, international aid workers and military personnel, among many others.

There were already clubs on many U.S. campuses to support the needs of this population, but now admissions and international student offices are enhancing their efforts to identify them and address their special needs — and to recruit them for admission.

For the 2004-2005 academic year, American University in Washington, D.C., experienced a drop of 14 percent in total international student enrollment compared with the previous year, says Fanta Aw, AU's director of international student services. Part of the shortfall stems from the discontinuation of an "English as a Second Language" program, but visa problems and cost constraints have also made numbers tumble.

"Global Nomads can help fill that void in the classroom because they offer a different perspective," Aw notes. At AU, a GN program aims to give this community a place to meet each other and share their experiences of living abroad; it also aims to educate academic advisers, professors and other students about them. The GN community also successfully pushed the admissions department to include a question on the application to help identify internationally-raised kids.

Third Culture Kids, who are used to transition and a mobile lifestyle, on average attend three universities during their undergraduate careers. This makes retention efforts essential. Aw, who grew up in several countries herself, first became aware of the need to extend international student services to certain American passport-holders several years ago, when the parents of some American students came to her office and said they were concerned that their kids wouldn't adjust to life in the United States.

Bringing Diversity into the Classroom

Identifying TCKs and GNs through an extra line on the application form has been standard practice at Lewis & Clark College in Portland, Ore., for four years; efforts to identify the community already on campus date back to the early 1990s. As a result, the number of TCKs on campus is about 100, two-thirds of whom hold an American passport. By contrast, international student enrollment dropped from 116 students in 2002 to 96 in 2003, and down to 83 in the fall of 2004.

Last year the international programs office at L&C designed a brochure targeted at TCKs that is used for recruiting freshmen from international schools, mainly in Asia, Director of International Student Services Greg Caldwell says. "It's almost as if they have their own expat culture," he observes. "They have much more in common with each other than with other Americans."

Antje Schiffler is a journalist in Frankfurt.

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Some issues are the same for this group as for foreign students, depending on where they lived before coming to the U.S., Caldwell says. Some "don't have a driver's license or they may not know a TV program. They don't know how to write checks or operate vending machines." Yet the students look and sound "American," so people might be less understanding of their situation, he adds. In addition, some teachers are not aware of what it means to have an internationally raised student in the classroom, so they might give examples based in U.S. culture. "Educating Educators" is therefore another goal of the GN students.

Perhaps because of such obstacles, on average the academic performance of the TCK community at that college is slightly (0.2 percent) below that of the U.S.-raised student body on campus, according to Caldwell's research.

California's University of the

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Pacific in Stockton has been persistent in its efforts to recruit internationally exposed students and lead the way in introducing a curriculum targeted at GNs, says Dr. Bruce LaBrack, professor of anthropology

and international studies. The School of International Studies there offers one track for GNs and international students and one for Americans. "You can choose to be treated as an international student and get those services or you can register like any other U.S. citizen," LaBrack explains. "In general, most of the GNs come in and realize they just want to do the regular course of study," he adds. "The curriculum is quite different. They don't require that you go overseas coming to the U.S. as an international student." Furthermore, the type of cross-cultural training they receive is different.

The school also seeks to actively recruit Global Nomads by promoting the program at conferences and overseas schools. "We think GNs are a very interesting population. They're the type of student you want because they bring diversity into the classroom," he says. ■

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