



## Strangers in a Strange Land

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By [Elizabeth Redden](#)

In interviews with 40 international students at four research universities, Chris R. Glass was struck by the relative absence of Americans from his subjects' stories. The interviewees, half undergraduate and half graduate students, described close relationships with their international peers, including those coming from countries other than their own. But while they frequently characterized their American classmates as friendly or helpful, only rarely did they seem to play a significant role in their lives.

"Only one student has described a significant relationship with a U.S. peer and that student was from Western Europe and that peer was her boyfriend," said Glass, an assistant professor of educational foundations and leadership at Old Dominion University. "That to me is a striking omission from the stories that they're telling."

As the number of international students at U.S. colleges continues to rise -- and as the mix of international students [has shifted](#) in favor of undergraduates -- there are increasing concerns as to how well they're being integrated into campus life. There have been periodic reports of [racist incidents](#) and -- overt discrimination aside -- there is the question of disconnection raised by Glass's research. Another study authored by Elisabeth Gareis, a communication studies scholar at Baruch College, found that [nearly 40 percent of international students reported having no close American friends](#). In explanation, many of the students cited "internal factors" such as limited language proficiency or shyness, but they also described a perceived lack of interest on the part of American students in other cultures.

At the recent [Association of International Education Administrators annual conference](#), a roundtable session on the integration of international students (co-moderated by this *Inside Higher Ed* reporter) drew a standing-room only crowd, as attendees discussed the difficulties they've encountered in encouraging and equipping American and international students to (productively) interact. Domestic students are not necessarily cross-culturally competent -- a point made lucidly when one audience member described the tendency of American study abroad students to request compatriots as roommates. At the same time, international students may not always be interested in initiating contact. An audience member from a Midwestern institution shared his observation that a fair number of students from China -- a rapidly growing and by [far the biggest group of international undergraduates](#) on U.S. campuses -- seem to be more interested in interacting with one another than with their American classmates.

Yet, even those students who are interested may find social structures on campus to be exclusionary or mystifying or both. On American campuses dominated by fraternity and sorority life, or obsession over intercollegiate athletics, or where everyone seems to have gone to the same high school, international

students may feel foreign in ways that go beyond their nationality. "The lack of interaction is as much due to individual attributes as it is to social context," said Glass, who is conducting his qualitative research in collaboration with Rachawan Wongtrirat, the assistant director of Old Dominion's international initiatives office. Given the natural tendency of people to gravitate toward others who are like them (what social psychologists call the "similarity-attraction effect"), "are universities creating contexts where these interactions can happen?" he asked.

In interviews with *Inside Higher Ed*, researchers and professionals in international education spoke about the challenges in this regard and their efforts to create opportunities for meaningful interactions between domestic and international students through programming. It seems that many universities have a long way to go in living up to the promise presented by increasing numbers of international undergraduates – the promise being increased opportunities for sustained and meaningful cross-cultural interactions in classrooms, dorm rooms, and so forth.

### **‘Encounters With Difference That Make a Difference’**

“It’s a combination of factors that have made this issue so salient,” said Larry A. Braskamp, the president of the Global Perspective Institute and a professor emeritus at Loyola University Chicago. “One is there are just a lot more international students on campus now, particularly at institutions that have not historically had a lot. The second is that everybody is interested in global learning: we know we need to prepare students to be more globally competent. And the third is that these students represent on some campuses a fairly significant contribution to the bottom line. Most of these students pay full tuition and as a result a lot of institutions see them as one way to balance the budget. So they have to make sure that the retention rate is high; they have to develop a good reputation so that other students will come.”

In Braskamp’s research, he’s found that entering American freshmen do not tend to think complexly, are not comfortable amidst difference and do not typically have friends who are unlike them. “We’ve said, O.K., the implication of all this is we need to create ‘encounters with difference that make a difference,’ ” he said. “I’ve thought of it as students being on a journey: they start with rather simplistic views of themselves, of their social interactions and the ways in which they understand the world around them. So in some ways what we need to do in college is increasingly provide them opportunities for encounters to get them to rethink who they are, how they think, and how they relate to others. In many ways, international students coming on campus is an opportunity for students, faculty members, and international administrators to take advantage of that difference and that diversity. But it’s really hard work.”

Such encounters can be curricular, co-curricular or informal: in fact, Braskamp’s research suggests that informal encounters such as discussion of current events with other students may be the most impactful. Still, he emphasized that there’s much more that can be done in the classroom to facilitate such encounters. In a sample of about 48,000 undergraduates at more than 140 four-year colleges, he found that about one-third report never having taken a course that “focuses on significant global/international issues or problems” or that “included opportunities for intensive dialogue among students with different backgrounds and beliefs.”

As one audience member at the AIEA conference said, unless faculty members are on board, all the student services programs in the world won't be enough: "Students really look to their professors to give them direction and advice and deepen their conversations, so if faculty were taught to embrace these conversations about 'difference' and 'other' and 'cross-cultural competencies' and international challenges in engineering, then those conversations would take on meaning for the students," she said.

Participants in the session described the value of professional development programs such as Duke University's [Intercultural Skills Development Program](#) for faculty and staff.

Case Western Reserve University is another institution that has begun to offer training designed to help professors better serve international students and integrate them into the classroom: according to Molly Watkins, the university's director of international affairs, the first two trainings focused on Chinese students and attracted 60 to 70 faculty members each. "There's obviously a need," Watkins said.

### **Opportunities for Meaningful Interaction**

At the AIEA session, audience members discussed co-curricular strategies such as peer mentoring or "buddy" programs, living-learning communities and other residence life initiatives, and more robust orientations for international students. Many universities have some iteration of one or all of the above: Mount Holyoke College, for example, has a new "Global Partners" program that pairs returning study abroad students with new international students and holds "re-orientation" events for international students during the academic year. The University of Iowa is launching a new required online orientation program that will begin in the summer before the students arrive and continue with five to eight small-group sessions throughout the fall semester.

The University of Arkansas at Fayetteville, which had 611 international undergraduates last fall, has a host of programs with alliterative names like Campus Cousins, Friendship Families and Global Greeks, which pair international students with American students, local families and fraternity or sorority members, respectively. Wesleyan University is "trying to capitalize on the idea of roommates," hosting a dinner for first-year international students and their roommates at the beginning of the fall semester, according to Alice Hadler, the associate dean for international student affairs and an instructor of English. St. Norbert College, a Roman Catholic institution in Wisconsin, has a living-learning community with 25 international and domestic students (international students are the resident advisers) and a 10-member interfaith group consisting of Muslim students from Saudi Arabia and domestic Christian students. Initiatives such as these reach only a small number of students, concedes Marcy O'Malley, St. Norbert's director of international programming, but, she said, "What I've seen work is one-on-one."

"Instead of superficial contact with a lot of people, do more meaningful contact with a smaller number, and let them be your ambassadors to the larger student body," she said.

Christopher J. Viers, the associate vice president for international services at Indiana University at Bloomington, has used the [International Student Barometer](#) to survey students about their experiences, and cited the surprising finding that international students rate their relationships with American students as those that are most important to them (as compared to relationships with other students from their home country or international students in general). "In looking at the feedback that came in we thought very critically about what we could do to help facilitate opportunities for international and domestic students to interact in meaningful ways to hopefully have conversations and potentially build relationships," Viers said.

In talking with colleagues across the country, Viers said he's come to the conclusion that "too often our programming is limited to the one-time, big, annual event." This event, which often takes the form of an international student fair or show, can be good in celebrating international students' contributions to campus and perhaps can help a domestic student learn a bit about another culture or cultures, but, he said, "opportunities for meaningful transformative learning are pretty limited." As such, he continued, "We work hard to provide the big annual event that helps to showcase the contributions of our students and the diversity of the population with the excitement and food and entertainment, but not a week goes by when

we're not putting together, hand-in-hand with students, small, highly interactive opportunities for domestic and international students to get together. We run a weekly noon concert series, for example, where students from our Jacobs School of Music perform classical music or folk music from their home country and then there's a free lunch that's provided. That regularly gets people who have an interest in music together."

"It's absolutely essential as colleges are putting in place plans to actively grow international enrollment that appropriate levels of service and support are put in place, and then the students have responsibilities as well," Viers said. "So much of just about anything in life in terms of what you gain from an experience has much to do with what you put into it yourself. This is where at times perhaps those of us in the field of international education are not vocal about some of the very real, very significant additional hurdles and challenges that students from other countries face while they're here: the enormous pressures that they're under to succeed academically and to move as quickly as possible through a program. It's very expensive to come to the U.S. to pursue an undergraduate degree. There are often major expectations from family members and others; there's a lot of pressure to succeed and do well." And then there are the extra academic challenges inherent in pursuing a degree in a non-native language. Is it any wonder that not every student will want to come out for mixers and "cultural coffee hours"?

"I think that sometimes we underestimate that pressure, and apply a different kind of meaning to the experience that we perceive a student is having," Viers said.