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THE INSTITUTIONAL COMMITMENT

IT’S A MAJOR EDUCATIONAL TREND OF THE NEW MILLENNIUM — an increasing number of international students are entering U.S. educational institutions, not only for graduate and undergraduate studies, but also for pre-university and even pre-secondary preparation. Professional organizations such as the National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS) and The Association of Boarding Schools (TABS) recognize both the value of having international students at independent schools and the need to provide additional support for these students. This handbook addresses the needs of independent schools looking to enroll international students for the first time, as well as schools that have admitted international students for many years but are seeking new ways to support them.

The decision to enroll international students has far-reaching implications, and a school should recognize that it will inevitably be changed by their presence. School personnel must develop new skills, ranging from technical know-how about immigration matters to the finer points of cross-cultural sensitivity. In some areas, specially trained
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personnel can manage the additional tasks and responsibilities, but the entire school community needs to be educated and committed to serving an international clientele. The introduction of international students into a more homogenous student body can generate an array of unfamiliar and potentially troublesome issues, including the emergence of dominating or self-isolating subgroups; culture shock; cultural conflict and misunderstandings; a curriculum inappropriate for international students; and faculty frustration.

This handbook is not comprehensive or exhaustive, but it raises a number of relevant issues that most schools will face. It may not answer specific questions, but it contains enough material to direct readers to appropriate sources of additional information. Schools contemplating enrolling international students will find some matters to consider and plan for before they make a commitment. Schools that have encountered some rough going after enrolling international students may want to re-evaluate their objectives and programs to serve their clientele more effectively. Schools with successful international student programs may also discover some useful suggestions.

THE INTERNATIONAL STUDENT DEFINED

For the purposes of this handbook, an international student is one whose previous cultural experience differs markedly from that of American students. The term “international” covers a broad variety of students: a Thai girl from Bangkok; a Puerto Rican whose first language is Spanish; a boy from Hong Kong who has attended primarily British schools; an English-speaking U.S. citizen raised in a transplanted North American cultural environment in Dharhan, Saudi Arabia; a recent East European immigrant; and a multilingual student, of whatever nationality, who has traveled widely and attended schools in a number of countries. Individually, these students bring with them unique and rich cultural and educational experiences. Collectively, they pose special challenges, raising an array of questions about the professional responsibilities of receiving institutions.

Independent schools that have decided to expand their enrollment of international students have discovered a quickly growing and receptive applicant market. This can sometimes be attributed to educational conditions abroad, while other times it can be ascribed to the attractiveness of a U.S. education, as well as to the status of English as an international language.
Some developing countries offer extremely limited educational opportunities. Sometimes there are too few schools, or the school system is so competitive or elitist that many capable students cannot pursue an education beyond a certain point. For these students, the American educational system has obvious appeal because of its accessibility. U.S. education is also diverse, especially within independent school circles. Students who feel limited by their own national educational system may thrive at a U.S. independent school better suited to their individual needs and talents.

International students frequently enter U.S. independent schools to gain an educational advantage. With more international students applying to U.S. colleges, some families believe that selective undergraduate schools in this country are getting more competitive. They enroll their children in independent schools to improve the students’ college prospects so they will stand a better chance of entering attractive professional and technical fields. These families also believe that the supportive environment of an independent school is the best place for their children to experience the U.S. educational system prior to university studies. Increased English language proficiency is also often an objective.

The international admissions pool of day and boarding schools has expanded with the addition of children of foreign nationals temporarily residing in the United States. Many of these families are associated with international agencies, universities, multinational businesses, embassies, and consulates. Independent schools are also an attractive alternative to public education for immigrants. These students and their families often find that independent schools offer a more appealing, personalized, supportive, and academically challenging environment than seemingly impersonal public schools, especially in large urban areas.

The increase in the number of Americans living abroad has resulted in a generation of students some call “global cosmopolitans.” Many attend international schools, but some decide to return home for secondary school. These students bring multiculturalism and an ability to see things from different perspectives, which are valuable to a school’s global education efforts. They also can experience assimilation difficulties at U.S. schools. Schools must be as sensitive to the special needs of “third culture” students as they are to the adjustment problems of citizens of other countries.

1 From the book by the same title, by Linda Brimm.
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SCHOOLS’ PROFESSIONAL RESPONSIBILITIES

The influx of international students into U.S. independent schools is due to various factors, but a significant one is the initiative of individual schools. Boarding schools have more actively recruited these students to supplement domestic enrollments, to maintain academically competitive environments, and to avert financial difficulties, as well as to cultivate diversity.

More than 700 NAIS member schools now admit international students. These schools vary in their degree of involvement in global education. At one end of the scale are international schools and boarding and day schools that are committed to a comprehensive, multi-program approach. At the other end are schools that are just starting to implement global education, or that have chosen to admit international students primarily to meet financial and enrollment needs. For some of those schools, re-evaluating and modifying existing programs and services may be critically important.

The solid and sustained interest by students from abroad is a compliment to both our culture and our educational system. It also represents a tremendous challenge to U.S. educators, one with profound professional and moral responsibilities. International education is a major U.S. “export product,” and the academic community should ensure that its institutions provide services that reflect uncompromised professional principles and practices.

Schools considering enrolling international students should proceed cautiously and thoughtfully. The benefits of an international student community can be substantial, but they are largely by-products of institutional foresight and skillful planning.

Depending on the origin, number, and previous preparation of its international students, a school can be significantly or only moderately affected. It is important for all schools to examine their purpose, programs, and attitudes to determine how committed they are to educating international students. This self-study should prescribe the areas demanding administrative attention, additional staffing, and policy and program development. Among other considerations, the school’s self-evaluation should respond to these general questions:

- Why does the school want international students, and what does it hope to gain from their presence?
- Are these reasons consistent with the school’s educational philosophy and purpose?
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• Is the entire school — trustees, administrators, teachers, alumni, students, parents — willing to change to accommodate international students?
• To what limits is the school willing to commit its resources, energy, heritage, and future to maintaining a multinational student body?

On a more practical level, the following issues deserve examination:

• How many and what kinds of international students are appropriate for the school?
• What policies and procedures have been established to attract, evaluate, and process international student applications?
• Is the school prepared to modify current programs and services specifically to respond to the needs of international students?

The answers to these questions should help schools determine whether and to what extent they should enroll international students. Whatever the decision, a school’s perception of and response to its international students will reflect directly on the institution and indirectly on the entire independent school community.