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International Undergraduates are Not a Resource for Neocolonial Exploitation

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Over the past several decades, campus internationalization has become a priority for many U.S. institutions (de Wit & Altbach, 2021). At an organizational level, internationalization has been defined as “the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of post-secondary education” (Knight, 2004, p. 11). As such, a variety of different strategies may be utilized to internationalize campuses, including increasing: the number of students studying abroad; international students/faculty/staff hosted by a campus; and programs (i.e. international branch campuses) operating outside the U.S. (Altbach & Knight, 2007; de Wit & Altbach, 2021; Jibeen & Kahn, 2015).

Within higher education’s framework of market-based neoliberalism (Mintz, 2021), the desires to diversify student populations and cultivate tuition revenue are often in conflict with one another and can result in unethical institutional actions that create unintended and problematic outcomes (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Buckner, 2019; Haapakoski & Pashby, 2017; Jibeen & Kahn, 2015). For example, academia in the U.S. has a deplorable history and widespread practice of “plantation politics” (after Williams, Squire, & Tuitt, 2021, p. 3). In this system, Black faculty, staff, and students and their labor are deemed essential to the academy, particularly regarding meeting diversity targets and conducting critical institutional functions (Carr, et al., 2021). At the same time, Black faculty, staff, and students are also systematically devalued, undercompensated, and treated as assets to be utilized for institutional gain (Carr, et al., 2021). Rather than promote increased equity and understanding, academic frameworks that operate in this way perpetuate systems of exploitation and function to preserve ingrained structures of White supremacy (Carr, et al., 2021). U.S. academic institutions must put policies and practices in place to end the systematic mistreatment of Black faculty, staff, and students.

Institutions of higher education in the U.S. must also ensure they do not replicate the practice of “plantation politics” in campus internationalization efforts. Although the systemic mistreatment of Black faculty, staff, and students in the U.S. is unique, there are general similarities in how Black and other students subjected to racial/ethnic marginalization are recruited and retained to diversify campuses, and how international students are recruited and retained to internationalize campuses. Admissions policies that are created with the primary goal of increasing international student numbers to meet diversity targets, increase rankings, and/or generate new lucrative revenue streams will continue to perpetuate this unethical and inequitable system. It is imperative that institutions of higher education actively resist and deconstruct the invasive evils of White supremacy and commit to dismantling neocolonialist frameworks that create policies that may unintentionally use international undergraduate students as a resource to promote the financial and reputational enhancement of entrenched institutions.

There are many individual, community, institutional, and global benefits that result from creating a diverse and internationalized student body (Hegarty, 2014; Jibeen & Kahn, 2015; Luo & Jamieson-Drake, 2013). To create more equitable institutions that truly value student diversity, academic leaders must actively resist the exploitation of marginalized populations, including international undergraduates. But this resistance will not be easy or simple. It will be critical for academic leaders to thoughtfully develop and implement policies that encourage institutions to focus admission efforts intentionally and meaningfully on geographic regions that are generally underrepresented in U.S. undergraduate student populations. Recruiting and retaining such students will require substantial resource investments, including the provisions of quality support mechanisms to foster personal, academic, and professional success once on campus.

To ensure access to equitable academic and co-curricular experiences, students originating from underrepresented parts of the globe may require extensive financial assistance to cover the costs of tuition, housing and meals, books, access to technology, and living expenses. These needs must be met through reliable financial commitments from host colleges and universities. Institutions will also need to have ample amounts and a variety of qualified staff in place to assist these students with their transition to the U.S. and provide them with continued support throughout their educational journeys.

Unfortunately, the implementation of such policies and best practices are challenged by the limited financial and human resources available to a large swath of colleges and universities. Many fiscally constrained institutions do not have the capacity to allow active and geographically distributed international student recruitment. And, perhaps more importantly, these under-resourced campuses may simply be unable to support international students in the ways described above. There is no simple, painless, or “one size fits all” solution to this problem. These challenges highlight the troubling reality that exists throughout higher education -- under-resourced institutions may consciously and actively recruit and admit students from a wide range of historically marginalized groups, including international students, without having the capacity to provide the necessary supports these students often need to be successful.

Simply put, it is unfair and unethical for institutions to admit students that they know they can't properly support. As succinctly stated by Biden (2022), “Don't tell me what you value. Show me your budget—and I'll tell you what you value.”. If campuses wish to reap the benefits of having international students as part of their communities, it is imperative that they also identify sustainable ways to prioritize supports for these students prior to their admittance. Anything less perpetuates an unjust, unidirectional stream of benefits to the host institutions that is grounded in the ongoing colonialist practice of treating international students as an extracted resource for institutional gain.

As U.S. institutions continue to prioritize the internationalization of their campuses with a focus on international student enrollment (Altbach & Teichler, 2001; Buckner & Stein, 2020; Childress, 2009; Knight, 2007; George Mwangi & Yao, 2020), they must also consider if and how such enrollment directly benefits the home communities from which these students originate. To counter international students being exploited as a resource, the principle of mutual benefit must be emphasized. Human capital flight or “brain drain” (the phenomena where talented young adults leave their home community for education abroad and then do not return) is a fundamental problem faced by many economic, social, and political development programs that operate in countries with low to moderate financial resources (Jibeen & Kahn, 2015). This challenge is exacerbated by admissions practices that actively facilitate international student enrollment in U.S. colleges and universities, as these admitting institutions often do precious little to compensate home communities for the human capital they have removed.

It is imperative that academic institutions not pursue admissions strategies designed to achieve institutional enrollment, ranking, or diversity goals that simultaneously harm international communities by directly or indirectly facilitating human capital flight. Instead, meaningful relationships between academic institutions and governmental/nongovernmental organizations in students’ countries of origin must be nurtured. These collaborations must co-develop programs and strategies that can grow and diversify international student populations at institutions in the U.S., while at the same time incentivizing the return of benefits derived from the education of these students back to their home communities.

Academia continues to grapple with current and historical practices grounded in colonialist ideology. If higher education is to adopt systemic reforms that support decolonizing praxes, such reforms must begin by ceasing the exploitation of human capital. Focusing on the principle of mutual benefit in the recruitment, admission, and retention of international undergraduate students can provide a model for how relationships between institutions, the students they educate, and these students’ home communities can result in equitable outcomes for all. Re-conceptualizing how academic institutions internationalize their campuses has the potential to provide meaningful benefits for all stakeholders and reduce inequitable outcomes that prioritize institutional goals at the expense of the very people these institutions serve.

The prioritization of international student support will likely entail difficult fiscal decisions, including strategically cutting other types of programming to create new budgetary capacity. The harsh reality is, if institutions can’t or won’t develop creative and intentional ways to provide these resources and supports for international students, the most ethical practice may be to not admit these students at all.

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