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David M. Johnstone

George Fox University, djohnsto@georgefox.edu

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tional, and cross-cultural ministries, or who have provided strong lay leadership within their churches and communities. Furthermore, despite the development of evangelical seminaries and liberal arts colleges in Canada over the last three decades, Bible institutes and colleges still remain the choice of thousands of Canadian students who enroll in post-secondary education each year.

Pilgrims Through a Strange Land: International Graduate Students At North American Evangelical Institutions

by David M. Johnstone

Introduction ¹

In surveying the general literature on Christian institutions of higher education, it is difficult to discover how North American schools have historically had an impact on international students. ² While there is significant history standing behind North American Evangelical institutions hosting international students, it is only when a search is made of the student organization records that evidence arises. This material illustrates Evangelical concern for students from outside of North America. ³ While the experience

1. I would like to thank and acknowledge the assistance of the student life departments and the international student advisors of Ontario Theological Seminary, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Westminster Theological Seminary and Wheaton Graduate School for their reflections on issues relating to international graduate students at their institutions.

2. Surveys such as George M. Marsden, *The Soul of the American University: From Protestant Establishment to Established Unbelief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994); Larry J. McKinney, *Equipping To Serve: A Historical Account Of The Bible College Movement In North America* (USA: Accrediting Association of Bible Colleges, 1997); and William C. Ringenberg, *The Christian College: A History of Protestant Higher Education in America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984) discuss the diversity of the student bodies, but neglect to examine the role of students from outside of North America.

3. See Appadurai Aaron, "Student Guests in North America," *Students And The Future Of Christian Missions: Report Of The Tenth Quadrennial Convention Of The Student Volunteer Movement For Foreign Missions, Detroit, Michigan, December 28, 1927 To January 1, 1928*, ed. Gordon Poteat (New York: Student Volunteer Movement for Foreign Missions, 1928), 302-305; Milton T. Stauffer, *Christian Students And World Problems: Report Of The Ninth International Conference Of The Student Volunteer Movement For Foreign Missions, Indianapolis, Indiana, December 28, 1923 To January 1 1924* (New York: Student Volunteer Movement for Foreign Missions, 1924), 448-449.

of foreign students in North America has been analyzed and surveyed, the specific experiences of students in *Evangelical* schools have not been investigated. Incidents have arisen which have been noteworthy for the news media,⁴ but the chronicling of their experience has not been systematically undertaken.

This paper hopes to be a beginning, although it does not presume to be definitive. It is an initial foray into a field which has been neglected. It is an attempt to understand the experience of mature graduate students as perceived by their respective institutions. This reflection attempts to examine the dilemmas, struggles and hurdles that mature, Christian graduate students face when they cross cultural boundaries in order to live and study in a North American setting. Hopefully this will be the beginning of some reflection and study on the part of student development practitioners, especially those who long to see the growth and maturation of church leaders for the next century.

When considering international students, three primary areas of concern arise: (a) How to orient and draw the new student into the cultural and educational ethos of the host institution and culture. (b) How to encourage them to maintain their original vision, which usually involves a return to ministry in their home country; and (c) how to help them adjust to reentry into their home culture. The first and third concerns are common to both Christian and secular institutions. The second issue is of particular concern for Evangelical graduate institutions which tend to draw mature students with a vision to see their home culture transformed and impacted with the gospel. This paper seeks to introduce these areas, while providing some suggestions for response to the issues they raise.

Sojourners To North America

Many Christian institutions actively seek and recruit international students. In some ways it reflects the institution's diversity and commitment to the global nature of the gospel. Yet at the same time it becomes an item of "prestige." Statistically it enables recruiters to boast about the variety of cultures and nationalities present on campus. This diversity

4. For example outbreaks of revival or incidents of crime on campuses make the news but the reporting is occasional and rudimentary.

is not restricted to any geographical region. While Christian graduate schools draw significantly from Asia, they also attract students from Africa, Europe and Latin America.⁵ The cultural diversity on North American campuses still has to be fully realized; it is having an impact. Schuller quotes one Evangelical institution which affirmed that: "A global consciousness permeates the total community of the seminary..."⁶ This movement has become a significant step in North American schools responding to the needs of the global church.

Orientation To A New World

While the situation is changing, as late as a decade ago, many schools believed "that normal organizational procedures organized for national students [would] adequately meet the needs of international students."⁷ Unfortunately this approach has been inadequate. Schools, even with low numbers of international students, are having to implement resources and programming to enable these students to become integrated into the fullness of the academic community and flourish in their new cultural context. The dynamics international students encounter are too consequential to be merely glossed over.

One of the distinctive features of attracting graduate students is that many of them have families. Frequently, due to prohibitive costs, only the student is able to travel the great distances. This creates significant anxiety and concern for their family on the part of the student. The experience of three students have stood out in my mind: The first was a middle aged Nigerian pastor who had to leave a wife and five children in a village divided between Muslim and Christian regions. Due to the remoteness of his family's home, the postal system was the only means of communication. The second was a Jamaican theology student, in his mid-twenties, who had to leave his fiancée and ailing parents in order to complete his studies. Occasionally communication

5. David S. Schuller, "Globalization in Theological Education: Summary and Analysis of Survey Data," *Theological Education* XXII, no.2 (Spring 1986): 20-22.

6. *Ibid.*, 41.

7. *Ibid.*, 40

was possible by telephone if scheduled well in advance, however it was the postal system which provided a slow but reliable contact. The third student was a believer from Northeastern India, who not only faced the winters of Central Canada, but also had to leave his wife and children in a politically volatile region. His experience was further exacerbated because both electronic means and the postal system failed in the maintenance of communication with his family. All of these students faced the distance and frustration of communication problems. Their respective institutions tried but were unable to meet the communication concerns, however they were able to respond to and provide for some of their other necessities.

While there are limitations to what an institution may provide for the international student, it can respond to many of the needs which arise. North American higher education has uniquely provided programming and "structure for out-of-class life of college students."⁸ This distinctive stands in contrast to many other countries who "...assume no responsibility for student development in areas other than intellectual growth."⁹ That it is beneficial for schools to invest in out-of-class room education is reinforced by research. "Research has repeatedly shown that out-of-class experience has a major impact on college students — emotionally, socially, morally and physically, as well as mentally."¹⁰ This experience is particularly true for international students. An institution is able to provide many of the resources needed for adjustment into a new and strange culture.

Three general areas seem to cause concern for international students. The first, and most obvious, is language acquisition.¹¹ This is particularly a challenge when entering graduate level work where each academic discipline has its

8. Gary H. Knock, "Development of Student Services in Higher Education," in *Developing Effective Student Services Programs: Systematic Approaches for Practitioners*, ed. Margaret J. Barr, Lou A. Keating & Associates (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1981), 657.

9. Ibid.

10. Theodore K. Miller & John D. Jones, "Out-Of-Class Activities," in *The Modern American College: Responding To The New Realities Of Diverse Students And A Changing Society*, ed. Arthur W. Chickering & Associates (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1981), 657.

11. Eugene A. Nida, "Readjustment — An Even Greater Problem," *Practical Anthropology* 14, no. 3 (May-June 1967): 114.

own presuppositions and terminology.¹² Secondly, cultural and environmental dynamics can significantly disorient students. Issues of personal space, food and weather can all have a profound effect on students.¹³ One orientation program prioritizes the need for providing students with (a) "...practical information that will enable them to cope with the immediate needs of settling into a new environment;" and (b) "...the main features of their new cultural, educational, and social environments."¹⁴ Another American practitioner has asserted that an ideal orientation program must ...be an ongoing process that deals with students' problems as they emerge, beginning with survival information, continuing with cultural issues about life in the United States [and Canada], and then, ideally, with culture-general topics such as "cultural awareness."¹⁵

Survival skills and general cultural information are critical for the flourishing educational experience of the international student.

However, even more radical for these students than cultural and language problems is their encounter with a new and strange educational system.¹⁶ Unfortunately many students assume that their educational background will be replicated in graduate school. However pedagogical philosophies can be radically different among cultures, transforming how material is presented and approached. Issues of academic integrity and plagiarism can cause prob-

12. Josef A. Mestenhauser, "Adding The Disciplines: From Theory To Relevant Practice," in *Culture, Learning, And The Disciplines: Theory And Practice Of Cross-Cultural Orientation*, eds. J.A. Mestenhauser, G. Marty and I. Steglitz (Washington, DC: NAFSA, 1988), 170-175.

13. Nida, 114. In surveys and conversations with those responsible for international students, food is frequently an issue. Meals are so different and types of ingredients so unfamiliar, that students, particularly from Africa and Asia, seek to do their own cooking rather than participate in residential meal plans. Unfortunately this also significantly reduces their interaction with other students, increasing their sense of isolation.

14. Ann Kuhlman, "Foreign Student Orientation Of The University Of Pennsylvania," in *Culture, Learning, And The Disciplines: Theory And Practice In Cross-Cultural Orientation*, ed. J.A. Mestenhauser, G. Marty and I. Steglitz (Washington, DC: NAFSA, 1988), 36.

15. Inge Steglitz, "Survey Of University Orientation Programs For International Students And Scholars," in *Culture, Learning, And The Disciplines: Theory And Practice In Cross-Cultural Orientation*, ed. J.A. Mestenhauser, G. Marty and I. Steglitz (Washington, DC: NAFSA, 1988), 14.

16. Nida, 114.

lems.¹⁷ Even the understanding of accountability, responsibility and communication can cause confusion and frustration when interpreted and defined by diverse cultures.¹⁸

While an institution is unable to respond to all of the needs of a given student, it should have the resources to help the student (and their accompanying families) with dynamics such as language acquisition, orientation to the host culture and introduction to the paedagogical climate. Jack Graves makes an important observation which would be helpful for Evangelical schools to remember:

Seminaries... might consider that the very same set of environmental and emotional circumstances that make the non-Christian international student open to the influence of the gospel on secular campuses are operative on their own campuses, also, making international students vulnerable to the loss of vision, and sometimes faith as well.¹⁹

Maintaining A Vision Of Old World

Many Evangelical international students come to North America in order to study so that they may return better equipped to serve their home churches, institutions and country. Many have a clear vision of what they desire to accomplish during their education. They tend to be mature, intelligent and spiritually experienced individuals. However, many never return to their home cultures. Graves, who is of the Overseas Council for Theological Education and Missions, reports some disquieting estimates. He states that in one observer's estimation "85 percent of students from the Caribbean to the United States or Canada have eventually

17. Plagiarism arises as a consistent problem in students from certain geographical regions. It stems not from lack of integrity, but from a fundamental difference in world-view. Clear communication of expectations seems to alleviate some of this problem.

18. Some correspondents have suggested that communication problems can lead to perceptions of unfairness, unkindness and bias against. Frequently these perceptions are not an accurate interpretation of events, but a misunderstanding due to the misreading of unspoken language and limited English skills.

19. Jack Graves, "Plugging the Theological Brain Drain," *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 28, no.2 (April 1992): 161.

emigrated north to live."²⁰ Another suggests that 75 percent of Columbian theologians do not return to Columbia.²¹ According to this observer there are "more Columbian theologians in the United States than in Columbia."²²

While it should be a concern, this hesitation to return to their home countries should not surprise North Americans. Many of the students have experienced the privileges and opportunities of living in a Western culture. Few desire to return to less "luxurious" settings. Our judgment should be tempered by the realization that among North Americans "Many of us fail to leave this Western paradise as missionaries for motives that differ little from theirs."²³

What can be done to encourage a maintenance of their original vision? Understanding the impact of misdirected financial aid and institutional policies and curriculum can go a long way to minimize the effects of "vision loss." Assistance to students should be directed principally towards those who have established relationships with and are recommended by home churches and institutions.²⁴ Finances should only be made available to those who have a proven track record of ministry.²⁵

However considerations must go much further than finances, they should also encompass the structure of the curriculum presented to the students. "Few seminaries have taken the initiative to ascertain the value of their training to international students who have returned home. Equally few have even done serious research into the ratio of students who have failed to return."²⁶ Part of the struggle also results from the student's attempt to discern how relative the training they have received will be in their home context. If they cannot understand how to apply the new knowledge, they

20. Ibid., 155.

21. Ibid.

22. Ibid.

23. Ibid.

24. Ibid., 161.

25. Ibid.

26. Ibid., 157. Fuller Theological Seminary is one school that has followed up on their students and report that "...90 percent of our international students do return to their countries of origin or of missionary service." See Paul E. Pierson, "School of World Mission: Fuller Theological Seminary," *Theological Education* XXII, no. 2 (Spring 1986): 76.

will be hesitant to return and if they do, they will face tremendous adjustments. ²⁷ Corey observes that even such basic issues as exposure to North American politics can cause problems:

...the foreign student needs to realize that American solutions to political problems like corruption and incompetence will not necessarily work when he gets home. I know several students who have spent a few years in jail because they apparently forgot that they left American-style freedom behind when they flew east from Kennedy Airport. ²⁸

Understanding and preparing students to deal with these and other dynamics will assist them in reentering their home culture. Too often the student is compelled to prolong their stay at a North American institution due to a deficient understanding of these issues. An Evangelical institution which seeks to assist national churches and schools must be aware of the dynamics confronting their students, and take action to minimize the student's loss of vision.

Reentry Into The Old World

The prospect of returning to a home culture can fill a student with the thrill of seeing family and friends, while piercing them with consternation about the prospects of reestablishing themselves in old settings. Eugene Nida tells of a young African student that he knew:

This young man was not unmindful of the difficulties which he had faced when he first went to America, but his concern in returning home was even greater for he realized something of the pressures and tensions to which he would be subjected. ²⁹

The anxiety arises from the belief that they have changed immensely, while those at home have remained essentially the same. While this evaluation may be incorrect, the student has been primed for this understanding by expectations which surround their entire education. It is expected that the student will return home and become an instrument of change, of progress in his native land...

27. James R. Corey, "Cultural Shock in Reverse," in *Cross-Cultural Reentry: A Book of Readings*, ed. C.N. Austin (Abilene, TX: Abilene Christian University Press, 1986), 158.

28. *Ibid.*, 158-159.

29. Nida, 114.

educators see the foreign student as bearer of technological and cultural light from America. We see his future as effecting technological development and putting an end to ignorance, superstition, and other kinds of cultural backwardness. ³⁰

It is not uncommon for the structure of the educational curriculum to present great difficulties for students.

Too often graduate courses are offered in such a way as to imply that their content has no relevance to particular cultural, geographical, political, or economic contexts.

Subjects are presented as though they are to be practiced in an ideal world, uninfluenced by outside factors. ³¹

Lee points out that the challenge for those in education is to provide the students with skills which allow them to contextualize the knowledge and understanding that they are accumulating. ³² If they are unable to identify the relevancy of a subject for their home culture, it will eventually lead to frustration. Corey observed this dilemma with some of his students. They wished to provide technological innovation into a fairly traditional and conservative culture. However, if they desired "to assume a role in the prosperous and challenging area of technological development, [they] must give up any plans to tamper directly with the cultural life of the country."³³ To put it another way, the student "must buy his future wealth and position at the price of wearing blinders to the cultural problems around him." ³⁴ This dichotomy will eventually lead to "more and more personal tension, frustration and bitterness." ³⁵ This frustration, will in the final analysis, prove to be partially a failure of the paedagogical investment directed towards their lives.

30. Corey, 155.

31. *Ibid.*, 158.

32. Jung Young Lee, "Multicultural and Global Theological Scholarship: An Asian American Perspective," *Theological Education* XXXII, no. 1 (1995): 45 suggests that the Euro-centric nature of North American theological education can pose many problems for those from outside of North America and Europe. Lee suggests that creative approaches to the presentation of theological reflection will "enrich theological reflection in North America." *Ibid.*

33. Corey, 156.

34. *Ibid.*

35. *Ibid.*

Conclusion

Graves has acknowledged that Evangelical institutions should not shy away from recruiting international students:

Seminaries in the U.S. [and Canada] can be justifiably proud of the role they played in training much of the overseas theological training force. But there can also be little doubt that indiscriminate acceptances and inadequate ministry to, foreign theological students is a legacy of Western seminaries that has directly contributed to the theological brain drain.³⁶

Attracting and educating culturally diverse students must not be approached lightly. It is imperative that North American schools not undermine the training and programs offered in those countries in which they recruit.³⁷ Subsequent to bringing students onto their campuses, North Americans must be prepared to provide resources and programs directed to the needs of international students and their families. Minimally, they will require orientation to the new culture and preparation for return to their home country. However, as a matter of integrity and goodwill towards the home church, the North American institution must also seek to maintain and clarify the vision which first compelled a student to seek an education far from home.

While North American schools have traditionally been active in out-of-class education, this must be expanded and contextualized to international students. Student development professionals can have an exponential impact cross-culturally. If they are able to establish programs and relationships that permit international students to flourish academically and socially, they will have a global significance for the church. If student development professionals fail in this task, the results are equally exponential. The home church can suffer the loss of a significant leader, thus potentially affecting the growth of God's kingdom in that land.

While much research must be done in this field and many questions must be articulated and answered, the reality is that God has brought the world to North America. Over the past centuries there has been an increase in immigrants from regions where the gospel has not flourished. At the same time vast numbers of students have come to gain a

36. Graves, 158.

37. Ibid.

Western education. Most significant have been those who have been compelled to come in order that they may be better equipped to go back. Upon return to their home countries, their North American education can provide them with the skills to significantly transform their culture, or it may handicap and paralyze their abilities to reflect the mercy and grace of God. Though all of these responsibilities do not lie in the hands of North American paedagogues, curricular and co-curricular, their impact is potentially vast. On the day of accountability, may we be judged as having been faithful and wise stewards of what God has placed in our care. *Soli Deo Gloria!*