

Balancing and Strengthening Partnerships in International Higher Education in Challenging Times

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6,921 – that’s the number of miles that separate Beijing and Washington D.C., where I serve as president of the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU). Despite the enormous geographic and cultural distance between China and the United States, we face many of the same common challenges when it comes to higher education.

That was one of my key takeaways when I attended the China Education Association for International Education & Expo in October. I had the rare opportunity to engage with educational leaders from around the world in a discussion on how we can continue to create and sustain educational partnerships that can meet the unique needs of today’s students.

AASCU represents nearly 400 state public colleges and universities, and systems in the United States, U.S. territories, and internationally with members in Guyana and the Bahamas. We educate approximately 3,350,000 undergraduate and graduate students in the United States and enroll 39 percent of the nation’s public, four-year undergraduates. We also educate a significant percentage of low-income students, students who are the first in their families to attend college, and students of color.

The famous Chinese proverb states, “Learning is a treasure that will follow its owner everywhere.” These wise words are jewels to us at AASCU and words we wholeheartedly believe in, because we know that when you expose a young person to new countries, new cultures, new languages, and different philosophies, they become global citizens in the truest sense of the word.

AASCU has a history of successful international higher education partnerships and scholarly exchange initiatives. Our worldwide partners hail from the United Kingdom, Brazil, Mexico, Cuba, and of course China, where our ties run deep—almost as long as the time the United States and China have enjoyed a diplomatic relationship.

As we mark the 40th anniversary of Sino-U.S.-Relations, it’s a fitting time to reflect on the relationship AASCU has forged with Chinese institutions through our student-focused, student-centered programs. These initiatives allow young scholars from each country to experience the unique cultures of our nations—and just as importantly, bring back home a greater sense of mutual understanding.

Student Mobility Trends in the Past Decade

When we look at social mobility trends and the importance of international education, the impact is significant. In 2007, a little over 81,000 Chinese students studied in the United States; just a decade later, that number had quadrupled to more than 363,000. The number of American students studying in China is once again experiencing growth after several years of decline.

In 2017–18, a little more than one million international students were enrolled at U.S. institutions, with China leading all other nations at 363,341 students, according to the International Institute for Education. For some context, that number represents 36 percent of international students.

However, the number of international graduate students has declined for two consecutive years. Meanwhile, according to early numbers from the fall semester, some U.S. universities are reporting that international student enrollment is down by 20 percent or more.

The United States has long thrived on a culture of innovation and diversity that draws upon the talents and creativity of students from every part of the world—including China. Some believe that the rumors regarding visa issues and the current political climate are contributing to the perception that the U.S. is no longer a welcoming country. However, when I met with the U.S. Embassy during my visit, they informed us that if you have the appropriate documents, visas will be approved. At AASCU, we are as committed as ever to welcoming China's best and brightest students. All you need to do is ask the students who are enrolled at our AASCU institutions.

AASCU is also committed to assisting our members in increasing and diversifying international student enrollment, whether by designing signature programs or strengthening our existing programs with established partners in selected countries and regions.

AASCU's Partnerships in China

AASCU has a long-standing history of international education partnerships in China. We have eight programs on student mobility alone including the Undergraduate Transfer Program, which dates back to 2001, and the Youth Exchange Students Program in which Chinese students participate in one year or one semester of non-degree study at an American institution of higher learning.

There also is the Rising Star Student Study Tour—a flagship student exchange program under the framework of the China-U.S. High-level Consultation on People-to-People Exchange (CPE) in the sector of vocational education. AASCU's International Education Office, a co-sponsor of this initiative along with CEAIE, selects students from its member universities to experience two weeks of intensive training and study in host Chinese vocational colleges.

This year's program was based in four cities: Beijing, Xi'an, Shanghai and Wuxi. More than a dozen American undergraduate students visited China for two weeks, spending time with Chinese students, learning about China's rich history and traditions, broadening their horizons, and building lasting relationships.

When we ask AASCU students who participated in the Rising Star Student Study Tour what they enjoyed most about their time in China, they say the real-world experience they gained and the collaborations with their Chinese peers was life-changing and life-affirming. Many of these students have never left their hometowns, let alone travel thousands of miles away to another country. For many, it was the first experience getting a passport, securing a visa, and getting on a plane. Seeing the world through a different lens is an experience our students never forget.

Over the last 18 years, 5,000 Chinese students have participated in our Sino-America Cooperation on Higher Education and Professional Development (CHEPD) 1+2+1 Program. Under this program, Chinese students begin their college career with a year in their Chinese institution, followed by two years in an American institution. They ultimately conclude their final year back in China, allowing them to earn two degrees: one from China and one from the United States. More than 2,500 have graduated, and 122 Chinese institutions and 40 U.S. institutions have participated. I'm pleased to note that half of the Chinese graduates have gone on to pursue graduate school in America.

The programs are indeed supporting the training of the future leaders of the United States and China—ultimately promoting mutual understanding between our two countries. This year will see the highest number to participate since the program's inception in 2001.

Each year for the past 18 years, in partnership with CEAIE, AASCU brings senior education leaders—including university presidents, provosts, department heads, and faculty—to China to participate in a series of activities designed to create and sustain educational partnerships. This year, more than 20 participants traveled to Beijing, working on building sustainable linkages.

On the faculty professional development side, approximately 100 professors from China and 30 from the United States participate in our Visiting Scholars Program annually. As part of our China Studies Institute 15 U.S. faculty members visit China for three weeks.

In the end, AASCU's programs in China have left a number of lasting benefits:

- Provided quality multi-cultural education to more than 5,000 Chinese students.
- Helped internationalize American universities, increasing awareness and broadening student perspectives.
- Deepened ties and connections between Chinese and American institutions, offering opportunities for collaborative research and joint program development.
- Promoted good will and mutual understanding between our two countries.

Best Practices Models and AASCU Experiences to Help Members Achieve Internationalization Goals

We are proud of the successes of our international partnerships that promote student mobility. Ensuring that our students are prepared in a rapidly changing global society is one of AASCU's core tenets.

But we know that we must remain clear-eyed about the challenges ahead. In 2009, AASCU published an essay titled *Leadership for Challenging Times*, a report of the Commission on Presidential Leadership and Global Competitiveness. The commission was comprised of 13 college and university presidents whose goal was to address the question, "What should our institutions do to ensure that our students remain globally competitive?"

Guiding their work was the premise that presidential leadership is key to the success of any effort to make the nation's state colleges and universities more effective in educating graduates who understand international and intercultural dimensions of the challenges confronting the nation and the world.

A decade after its publication, we are still examining the keys to success in the innovation and transformation of higher education, specifically with higher education leadership. We are compelled to ask ourselves the tough questions:

- How should we, as educators, prepare our younger generations to be ready for this fast-changing world?
- How do we prepare them not just for skills they need, but also the awareness and understanding of diverse cultures and traditions around them?

Some of the challenge in meeting these goals are financial. We know that exposure to other cultures is enormously beneficial on both a personal and professional basis, but far too many students don't have the financial means to study abroad.

Therefore, per the report's recommendations, it is incumbent upon all of us to "explore strategies to make study abroad a more viable and attractive option for all students." This is particularly a challenge for students of color, low-income and/or first generation college students in the U.S. who represent the fastest growing component of higher education in the country.

While internationalization is growing more prevalent across higher education, the 2009 AASCU report also recommended that we "affirm the centrality of global competence in an institutional mission and strategic plan." The study urged us to use our curriculum, pedagogy and other learning opportunities to strengthen global awareness. Ten years after the report was written, these challenges still hold true as the pace of technological change continues to accelerate.

AASCU is also committed to assisting our member institutions in strengthening the internationalization of their campuses in order to fulfill their mission to prepare engaged global citizens through high quality programming and services.

We will accomplish this goal through a few important steps:

- Initiating and nurturing partnerships with countries and international agencies that will enrich student experiences, faculty expertise, and foster an inclusive campus culture.
- Facilitating and supporting bilateral partnerships and exchanges through targeted international development and presidential missions.
- Providing professional development for university administrators and faculty through high quality training programs in the U.S. and abroad.
- Strengthening exchange programs and international projects with existing partners and explore new opportunities in the areas that may have potential for significant impact on student learning and cultural understanding.
- Assisting AASCU campuses in increasing and diversifying international student enrollment by designing signature programs with established partners in selected countries and regions.
- Promoting and supporting study abroad programs on member campuses as an impactful, high-impact student success strategy.
- Increasing opportunities for diverse AASCU faculty and students to travel abroad through short-term programs such as the Rising Star and the Chinese Studies Institute.

Through strong communication, mutual understanding, tolerance and trust, we can achieve mutual benefits for our institutions and students in the international community.

I left China heartened by the shared commitment I saw for building a stronger international education system. I saw the same passion and sense of urgency shared by so many of my counterparts. Through our mutual interests, we can continue to work together to build stronger connections—ultimately enabling more of our U.S. students to choose China as a study abroad destination and vice versa.

I know firsthand that education transforms lives and serves as a bridge between cultures. So, let us continue to support academic exchanges and nurture our institutions to continue to promote international education. In doing so, we can help our students be more global-minded as they develop solutions to our planet’s most pressing problems—solutions that will greatly influence all of us and generations to come.

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