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The value of student diplomacy

By Erik Jones and John A. Gans Jr. | May 25, 2008

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AS THE END of the school year nears, students will be making decisions about their next academic steps. Many will want to study abroad to prepare themselves for the globalized economy. Unfortunately, they may choose to stay at home because the dollar has shed so much of its value against other major world currencies. While many factors have contributed to the damaging of the US image over the past seven years, the decline of the dollar could create another barrier to a valuable reputational salve: student diplomacy.

At this time last year, \$1.36 could buy a euro. Now it is nearly \$1.60. The change makes paying for tuition and living expenses, as well as the interest on larger student loans, more expensive at European institutions, long popular study-abroad destinations. In one year, tuition - without living expenses - of 25,000 euro increased from \$34,000 to \$40,000.

While boosters for a depreciated dollar claim the US economy will benefit as America becomes the source of cheaper goods, this faith in free-market correctives is misguided with education decisions. The correction collapses as foreign students eager to study in the United States using more valuable currency decide to stay home upon finding the nation's welcome mat replaced with fingerprint scanners and complicated by difficult and expensive visa processes.

The Institute of International Education found that after a steep slide, the number of international students studying in the United States finally began to increase in the 2006-2007 school year, the last set of data available; but the total number of international students studying in the United States had yet to reach the all-time-high level of the 2001-2002 school year, before new and more onerous visa requirements were enacted after the attacks of Sept. 11.

The Pew Global Attitudes Project June 2007 makes clear the power of everyday Americans and familiarity. Americans are more popular than their country in hearts and minds around the world: The Pew 2007 report found "attitudes towards Americans are often more positive than attitudes towards" the United States. For example, while only 30 percent of Germans had a favorable opinion of the United States, 73 percent had a positive view of the American people.

The Pew study also found the opinion of the United States tends to be more favorable among those who have visited the United States or have regular contact with friends or relatives living in the country. Foreign students who study in the United States or in their home countries with Americans can better appreciate the US goodness that official public diplomacy channels have struggled to promote in recent years.

Student diplomacy is admittedly just a part of the US foreign relations arsenal, but it can be used effectively to strengthen ties among nations. France and Germany placed student exchanges at the heart of their reconciliation efforts in the 1960s, and the European Union's Erasmus Program, which helps students study in another European country, has been successful in helping integrate Europe since the late 1980s.

Much of recent international disapproval of the United States is policy-related, but the dollar's continued decline will compound policy disagreements by keeping our students at home. The United States can neither afford further reputational erosion nor a generation of Americans who miss out on the training critical for a further globalized world.

While fixing the dollar's woes overnight will be difficult, the United States should find ways to help Americans get abroad - with increased funding for study-abroad scholarships and increases to the amount of subsidized government loans available to those studying in foreign countries. It should also help bring the world to the United States - by opening visa requirements for foreign students and making the US immigration services more customer friendly - to ensure the United States gets the biggest diplomatic bang for its depreciated buck.

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