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Devaluing a diplomatic asset

By Erik Jones and John A. Gans Jr.

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BOLOGNA:

As the end of the school year nears, many American 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 have to stay at home because the dollar has shed so much of its value against other major currencies.

While many factors have contributed to the damaging of America's image over the past seven years, the decline of the dollar could impose yet another barrier to a valuable asset: student diplomacy.

At this time last year, \$1.36 could buy a euro. Now that currency costs 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 \approx 25,000 increased from \$34,000 to \$40,000.

While boosters for a depreciated dollar assert that the U.S. economy will benefit as America becomes the source of cheaper goods, this faith in free-market correctives is misguided when it comes to decisions involving education.

Moreover, many foreign students whose eagerness to study in the United States is bolstered by a more valuable currency now decide to stay at home because America's welcome mat has been replaced with fingerprint scanners and difficult and expensive visa processes.

The Institute of International Education has 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 latest set of data available; but the total number of international students studying in the United States had yet to reach the all-time-high of the 2001-2002 school year, before new and more onerous visa requirements were enacted after the attacks of Sept. 11.

According to the Pew Global Attitudes Project of June 2007, Americans are more popular than the United States government in hearts and minds of people around the world. 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 that the opinions of foreigners toward the United States tends to be more favorable among those who have visited America or have regular contact with friends or relatives living in the country.

Foreign students who study in the United States or with Americans in their home countries can better appreciate the positive aspects of American life and traditions that U.S. diplomats have struggled to promote in recent years.

Student diplomacy is admittedly just a part of the U.S. 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 to integrate Europe since the late 1980s.

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

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

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