

# Thoughts on International Students

Henry W. Kinnucan

This award is indeed an honor. Let me first express my appreciation to colleagues in my home department who nominated me and put together the packet, to those who wrote letters of support, and to the Southern Agricultural Economics Association Awards Committee for selecting me. It was a pleasant surprise. I would also like to thank four individuals who opened doors at critical junctures in my career. As academic advisors, Lyle Fettig (undergraduate) and Ben Senauer (graduate) went beyond the call of duty to offer friendship as well as expert advice. As academic employers, Olan Forker (Cornell) and Joe Yeager (Auburn) provided opportunity, but also unstinting support. To all: Thank you.

For their seminar, award winners are given the choice of describing their professional activities or selecting some other topic. I have elected to discuss international students. The topic is important because international students account for a significant share of graduate enrollment in many of the agricultural and applied economics programs across the country. In my home department, for example, 22 of the 31 Ph.D. students and eight of the 18 Master's students currently enrolled in the program are from outside the United States. I know from serving as graduate program officer that not all faculty members are happy with this situation. Thus, partly in response to their concerns, I will attempt to address whether the benefits of

international students outweigh the costs. In the interest of full disclosure, I married an international student. My analysis, therefore, might not be without prejudice.

## Costs

### *The Writing Challenge*

Perhaps not unlike sister departments across the country, most of the international students in my home department come from Asia where the language structure is very different from English. Although these students are conversant in English, their ability to write in English, especially at a level required for a journal submission, is limited. Consequently, faculty are reluctant to take on the responsibility of advising these students, as the task of getting the thesis or dissertation into presentable form is both tedious and time consuming. And any journal publications that might come from the work often require that the major professor assume a major role in writing the article.

In its 1991 report, the Commission on Graduate Education in Economics suggested students need more writing in their first two years (Krueger, 1991). Reed (2010) reports that seven of the top 13 U.S. agricultural economics departments have incorporated a research paper into their requirements for a Ph.D. Two of these departments use the research paper in lieu of a written preliminary exam. Two years ago my home department expanded its preliminary requirements to include a research paper. All entering Ph.D. students who hold a master's or equivalent degree now must submit a journal-quality research paper after their first full year of study. The paper then undergoes a formal

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review that emulates the journal review process. The student has two chances at revision to bring the paper up to journal standard. If, by the end of the student's second year, the paper with revisions does not meet the standard, the student is given the choice of leaving the program or converting to a terminal M.S.

For departments that have taken this step, the writing challenge is compounded in that in addition to basic grammar, organization, and sentence structure, students must be taught how to write for journals. In my home department we approached this challenge by developing a special topics course that covers the elements of journal paper writing as well as the journal publication process. In addition to exposing students to the literature on journal paper writing and publication, the course assists the students in developing a prospectus that serves as the basis for their research paper. The course also devotes some attention to plagiarism, as this has been found to be a significant problem with papers submitted by international students from countries where the notion that an author owns his/her words and ideas either is not accepted, or is not taught. For these students, special instruction must be given on how properly to use other people's ideas in writing, how to paraphrase, and when direct quotations are appropriate.

### *Displacement of Domestic Students*

International students compete with domestic students for limited slots, and for assistantship funding. In instances where international students outnumber domestic students, as is true in my home department, this can lead to the perception that domestic students are being displaced. Although this perception is inaccurate because international student enrollment share mirrors their share in the applicant pool, it tends to erode support for the graduate program.

A related issue is whether "hard" assistantship dollars, that is, those provided by state and federal government as opposed to contracts and grants, should be used to fund international students. The concern is that using state dollars to subsidize the education of international students might erode taxpayer support for our programs. Although I do not know whether this

concern is valid, I do know that it erodes further faculty support for the graduate program. This raises costs by shifting a larger share of the burden of graduate instruction and advising to a smaller subset of faculty.

A reviewer noted that the aforementioned erosion in faculty support seems to rest on two premises: "1) domestic students have an 'entitlement' when it comes to hard dollars even when they are less competitive applicants, and 2) international students are incapable of doing research that contributes to the goals of state and federal government funding sources." As a test of the second premise, consider the results for the first cohort of students in my home department required to produce a Ph.D. research paper. Of the nine papers submitted by international students, all but two were on topics related to agriculture, the food system, or rural communities. Of the three papers submitted by domestic students, only one could be so designated. The five top-scoring papers were written by international students. As for the first premise, suffice it to say, I could find nothing written that specifies preference should be given to domestic students in the allocation of assistantship dollars. Our working assumption in allocating these dollars is that stakeholders (defined to include consumers as well as producers) are more interested in the rigor of the science produced than in the nationality of the researcher.

### **Benefits**

#### *Role Models*

International students are go-getters. The willingness to leave one's native land to study abroad implies a level of ambition a cut above the norm. Most international students have mastered at least one foreign language. To qualify for graduate study in the United States, international students typically must out-compete domestic students in terms of test scores, grade point averages, and other indicators of academic achievement. This is especially true for students seeking financial support, as most are. Thus, they must study harder, and be more disciplined than domestic students.

Financial constraints often mean that international students must leave spouses or children behind, at least in the first year of graduate study. The separation from a child is especially hard. Given the sacrifices that international students must make both to qualify for graduate study in the United States, and to pursue that study once accepted into a program, it is hard not to admire these students. My experience has been that they possess, almost to a person, a strong work ethic, high ethical standards, and an unflinching determination to excel and make their mark in the profession.

#### *Window to the World*

International students add a cosmopolitan aspect to the department. They provide domestic students an opportunity to rub shoulders with peers from all corners of the globe. In my home department, in addition to a relatively large contingent from mainland China, our graduate enrollment currently includes students from Chad, Ghana, Ivory Coast, Jamaica, Kenya, Morocco, Peru, South Korea, Turkey, and Vietnam. The intermingling of domestic and international students can lead to friendships that last a lifetime and provide an unmatched opportunity to learn about other peoples and cultures.

One of my fondest memories as an undergraduate student was befriending a graduate student in economics from Japan. The many meals we shared in his apartment prepared by his very traditional Japanese wife introduced me to Japanese culture and cuisine. He (and she), in turn, learned something about American life through our travels together, including a vacation to Myrtle Beach and canoe trips around the Midwest. Although our paths diverged upon graduation, in the ensuing years our professional travels enabled us to reconnect in Washington, D.C., Boston, and Tokyo. The occasion for our Tokyo reunion was the triennial meetings of the International Association of Agricultural Economists. That undergraduate connection with an international student made what would have been just another international meeting an immensely enjoyable experience.

As a faculty member, the exposure to international students provides unique opportunities

to enlarge one's research agenda, and to gain valuable international experience. A highlight of my career was spending a semester at China Agricultural University teaching in the Leadership for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (LEAD-21) Program sponsored by Winrock International. The purpose of LEAD-21 was to develop leaders for the 21<sup>st</sup> century by providing a select group of 50 Ph.D. students with western-style training in economics. This was accomplished by bringing professors from the United States and other western countries to Beijing to teach in the three-year program. I spent spring semester of 1997 there teaching courses in agricultural prices and marketing. In addition to the pleasure of interacting with a group of highly capable and motivated students, a generous travel budget provided by Winrock enabled me to take a number of cross-country excursions with individual and small groups of students to enjoy points of interest together, but also, in some cases, to meet their families: a truly unique and wonderful experience. And I doubt this experience would have been possible without the encouragement and support of one of my graduate students who had spent time on the faculty at China Agricultural University prior to coming to Auburn, and who had encouraged me to apply to the program.

#### *Enhanced Research Productivity*

In their study of early-career publication success, Hilmer and Hilmer (2009) found that the research productivity of the dissertation advisor matters more than the reputation of the graduate program from which the student graduated. Specifically, their results (p. 290) "suggest that students attending lower-ranked programs but working with superstar faculty publish both more total and top 36 articles and more quality-adjusted pages than students attending top-ranked programs but working with less prominent advisors." In short, productivity begets productivity, and students interested in research careers would be wise to choose carefully their dissertation advisor.

An interesting aspect of Hilmer and Hilmer's regressions, mentioned by the authors only in passing, is the suggestion that international

students, *ceteris paribus*, are less likely to publish. For example, in the regression explaining total number of articles published, the estimated coefficient for the dummy variable “international student” is  $-0.87$  ( $t$ -ratio =  $-3.4$ ) compared with  $1.67$  ( $t$ -ratio =  $4.1$ ) for the dummy variable “star advisor.” This suggests being an international student cuts the advantage of having a prominent advisor by approximately one half. Although this result is hardly surprising given the challenge of writing in a non-native language that confronts many (most?) international students, in interpreting the result it is important to keep in mind the “all other things being equal” qualification. In my experience of advising some 20 international students, most at the Ph.D. level, their work ethic and drive to excel more than compensate for any language deficits.

Indeed, as I reflect on my own success at publishing, particularly in the later stages of my career, international students have played a prominent, and in some cases, decisive role. Several of my most cited (co-authored) articles are the product of the talents and dedication of international students I have had the pleasure to advise or work with over the years. In short, international students have contributed significantly to my research productivity, and a perusal of our major journals suggests I am not alone in this regard.

### Concluding Comments

Given that international students are likely to account for a significant share of our graduate student labor pool into the foreseeable future, it is wise for us as faculty to celebrate the benefits, and do what we can to mitigate the costs.

With respect to the latter, one positive step recently taken by my home institution was to expand the services of its Writing Center to include a series of workshops tailored for graduate students. This was a joint effort sponsored by the Graduate School, the Graduate Student Council, and Auburn University Libraries. The workshops meet Friday afternoons for three hours for a total of seven sessions, with each session designed to address a specific aspect of graduate-level writing. An added positive step, recently taken at the college level, is a Graduate Student Professional Development Seminar Series. This series meets weekly over the latter part of spring semester with each session designed to address a specific aspect of job preparation and search, including what constitutes an effective letter of application, curriculum vita, and job seminar. To the extent international students avail themselves of these new services, it should lessen the burden on individual faculty of the language aspect of their training.

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