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The American University Meets the Pacific:

How the Increasing Enrollments of Students from Asia are Transforming the American University

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The American University Meets the Pacific (AUPC) Lecture Series is born in an ongoing (2010-) research project by the same name, coordinated by faculty members Nancy Abelman (Anthropology, Asian American Studies, East Asian Languages and Cultures), Soo Ah Kwon (Asian American Studies, Human and Community Development), Tim Liao (Sociology), and Adrienne Lo (Anthropology) at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

The project and lecture series are principally interested in the American university as a contact zone in which record levels of international undergraduates, largely from Asia, meet American students whose futures are increasingly impacted by global transformations, the economic and scientific rise of Asia among them. Reflecting the research expertise of the faculty members, the project focuses on China and South Korea, which are also the largest sending countries for international undergraduates at UIUC and in the United States at large. Further, the project focuses on the Colleges of Engineering and Business. Locally and nationally, these are the areas with the greatest international student concentration, and the fields in which Americans most worry that they are losing, or even have lost, global preeminence.

Through the project and lecture series, we ask how the escalating numbers of international undergraduates are transforming the American university. Broadly there are several policy-relevant questions:

- (1) How should the American university change in the face of this transforming student demography?
- (2) What are the dangers of U.S. public universities becoming reliant on these students as a critical source of revenue?
- (3) What can the U.S. university as a transforming contact zone teach us about how universities can better prepare domestic students for an increasingly global and competitive workforce?

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For more information on *The American University Meets the Pacific Century*: <http://aupc.weebly.com/aupc-conference-2012.html>

Many American universities, like top-tier universities throughout the world, are increasingly becoming global institutions, no longer held exclusively to national interests (Altbach 2008; Gibbs 2010; Mohrman, Ma and Baker 2008; Oplaka and Hemsley-Brown 2010; and Slaughter and Rhoades 2004). Indeed, in the second half of the 2000s, UIUC has seen remarkable changes in the composition of its undergraduate student body. Illinois was long a protectionist state for higher education; a UIUC undergraduate degree was largely a state-good, guarded by the legislature, among other stakeholders. Over the past three years, however, UIUC has become a campus where as much as 25 percent of first year students in the colleges of Business, Engineering, and Liberal Arts and Sciences are now international students, primarily from China, South Korea, and India. Indeed, nationally, UIUC is among the top 3 public universities with the largest number of international undergraduates in the United States. Our own dramatic increases reflect the general national trends: indeed, the percentage of international undergraduates in the U.S. is currently at an all-time high.

This larger context occasions several broad questions. First, a number of scholars, anthropologist Aihwa Ong and geographer Katharyne Mitchell foremost among them, have alerted us to a veritable cultural warfare as Asian elites find their way to North American schooling (Mitchell 2001; Ong 2006). They ask whether the liberal democratic ideals of the American university, including multiculturalism’s commitment to an integrated national community, are foundationally shaken by international students who pass through the American university to accrue the technical skills for flexible citizenship elsewhere (see also Mohrman 2006). Indeed, some recent survey data reports, for example, that only 10% of Chinese international students imagine settling in the U.S., although 54% report wanting to spend up to 5 years here after graduation – and again 52% of Chinese undergraduate students answer that the “the best job opportunities” lie in their own home (Wadwa et. al 2009). We have a great deal to learn about what American students assume about these new international students and their place in American higher education.

Second, we ask how this trend is shaping American undergraduates’ vision of their futures as global citizens in the broader context of the global economy, and in what some have called “the Pacific Century.” With the widely decried slippage in the U.S. global hegemony in scientific and technological fields (with worrisome decreases in the U.S. market share of top-tier journal publications, alarmingly low rates of students majoring and earning higher degrees in these fields, comparatively dismal showing of American students in test scores in math and science and so on) and the particular attention to the “Rise of China,” these questions are particularly pressing (Mohrman 2011, Mohrman and Wang 2010). Also of note is that while U.S. international student numbers are up, we are in fact enjoying less of the pie of total global student mobility (slipping from 2001 to 2008 from 25% to 21%; while China grew from under 2% to 6%).

Third, we can think about the impact of this internationalization on the racial realities of the American university. As globalization accelerates the mobility of people, ideas, and media (Appadurai 1996), one perhaps unexpected consequence has been the rise of what sociologist Karen Pyke (2003, 2010) calls “intraethnic othering,” or the heightened salience of divisions within what might be considered one ethnic/racial group. Preliminary research on this project has already documented the tense relations between those Asian Americans who find themselves becoming the minority of Asians on their campus, and those international undergraduates who see themselves as wealthy, cosmopolitan elites with

little in common with local Asian Americans. We thus call for further attention to the often-fraught meeting of multiculturalism (with its historical focus on domestic diversity) and globalization (which is frequently silent on race). Finally, our lecture series considers the changing Asian realities that drive this education migration; the transforming U.S. university must continue to take stock of these contexts in order to understand U.S. higher education as a global good which is necessarily in flux in a transforming global marketplace of higher education (Hagedorn and Zhang 2011).

With these contexts and processes in mind, the AUPC lecture series and project asks:

- What are the motivations and expectations of these Chinese and South Korean international undergraduate students? Are they interested in the liberal and multicultural commitments of the American university? How do their goals change over time as they experience the realities of the American university?
- How do American students understand and respond to this new student body? Do they think of these international students as in any way detrimental to American multiculturalism and liberalism?
- Do Asian American students experience these demographic changes in particular ways? Are they inclined to distance themselves from these newly-arrived Asian students? What is the nature and extent of the interactions between domestic students and these international students?
- Do domestic students who aspire to become engineers and business professionals feel threatened by the significant number of students from precisely those countries that represent the greatest scientific and economic challenge to the United States? Are they worried about their professional futures?
- How are university professionals, including faculty, responding to and managing this new student body?

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Recommended Readings

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