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CHAPTER ELEVEN

Drawing on Gifts of International Students to Develop International Partnerships

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It was Tuesday of the first week of classes for the fall 2012 term. At two o'clock in the afternoon, swamped with student petitions to register for classes and balancing myriad administrative issues, I found a young man with an unfamiliar accent standing on my office threshold. "I don't have an appointment, but might you have a moment? My name is Carl. This is my second day in the states from Norway, and I heard about the honors program and would like to join."

A few days exist in an educator's life that one can consider change moments, and that particular Tuesday proved to be one for me. Carl, a sophomore transfer student from the American College of Norway, demonstrated the rare confidence to reach out, and in doing so he has transformed honors education at our institution. Carl has served as an invaluable catalyst for our honors college to form an unprecedented relationship with the Norwegian Nobel

Institute (NNI). The NNI supports the five-member panel that comprises the Nobel Committee and annually awards the Nobel Peace Prize. The possibilities of this relationship are only now coming to fruition: in the words of poet Robert Browning, “The best is yet to be . . .” (“Rabbi ben Ezra” 2).

Extraordinary experiences unfold in Carl’s story, but it also provides honors directors with sage advice: drawing from the gifts of international students and inviting them into the honors community can play a dramatic role in internationalizing honors. Carl’s exemplary involvement provided intercultural understanding and an appreciation of global citizenship among students in our honors college and the larger campus community. His participation triggered a progression of events that ultimately created an institutional partnership with the NNI. The support that enabled Carl to acclimate into honors education and the strategies we collaboratively used to build an international partnership are arguably replicable on any campus. Carl’s story suggests how other institutions might maximize unique opportunities for engagement with their own international student population. Before explaining Carl’s contributions, this essay contextualizes the possibilities of engaging international students by reviewing the current statistics regarding international students in the United States.

OVERVIEW OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN THE U.S.

The number of international students studying in U.S. higher education institutions reached “an all-time high—1,094,792 students—during the 2017–2018 school year” (Morris). This increase followed a “demonstrated annual increase over the past eleven years” (Ross). Indeed, at West Chester University of Pennsylvania, the Office of Institutional Research statistics indicate an enrollment of thirty international students from a dozen countries in 2007, which grew to sixty-three students from over thirty countries in 2017.

A November 18, 2015, segment on National Public Radio’s *All Things Considered* reported a nearly ten percent increase in international student enrollment between 2014 and 2015, representing almost 975,000 international students studying in the U.S.

(Turner). The U.S. higher education system has long been known for its quality. That reputation has, in the past decade, expanded beyond the Ivy League—and so many international students are articulating in institutions around the country, according to Allan Goodman, president of the Institute of International Education. Goodman explains that many international students look to the U.S., where opportunities abound to take college courses and pursue careers based on personal choice rather than careers chosen for individuals based on their exam results. “International students,” notes Goodman, “have more choices than ever before on where to pursue higher education. The dedication of American colleges and universities to students’ academic, professional, and personal success is one of the main factors in our international competitiveness” (qtd. in Morris).

While students come to the United States to study from many regions of the globe, China and India are the largest sources, with Chinese students constituting thirty-six percent of the total international student population in the U.S. and Indian students placing second with nearly eighteen percent (“International Student Totals”). According to the Institute of International Education, while international students are spread over some two thousand institutions, they tend to cluster on the east and west coasts (“Top 25 Institutions”). Figure 1 shows the top ten host institutions for international students in the U.S. in the 2017–2018 school year (“Top 25 Institutions”).

International students pursue studies in a wide range of academic disciplines. Figure 2 depicts the students’ most popular fields of study in 2016–2017 and 2017–2018 (“International Students by Field”). Engineering, business and management, and math and computer science were the top three fields of study for international students, accounting for more than half of the international enrollment at U.S. higher education institutions. Between 2016–2017 and 2017–2018, the greatest increase was seen in math and computer science, and a slight decline appeared in business and management. Notably, 48% of international students were in STEM fields and potentially eligible for extended Optional Practical Training

FIGURE 1. TOP INTERNATIONAL STUDENT HOSTING INSTITUTIONS BY POPULATION, SY 2017–2018

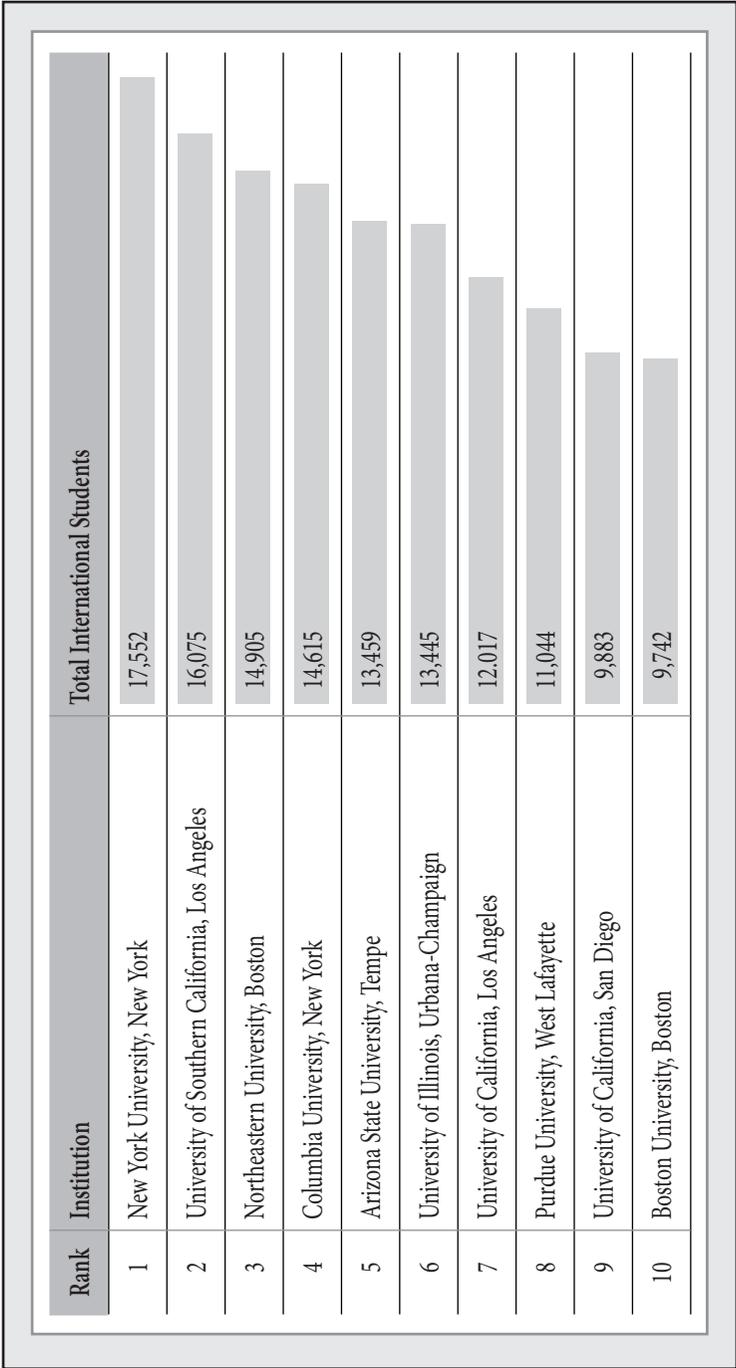
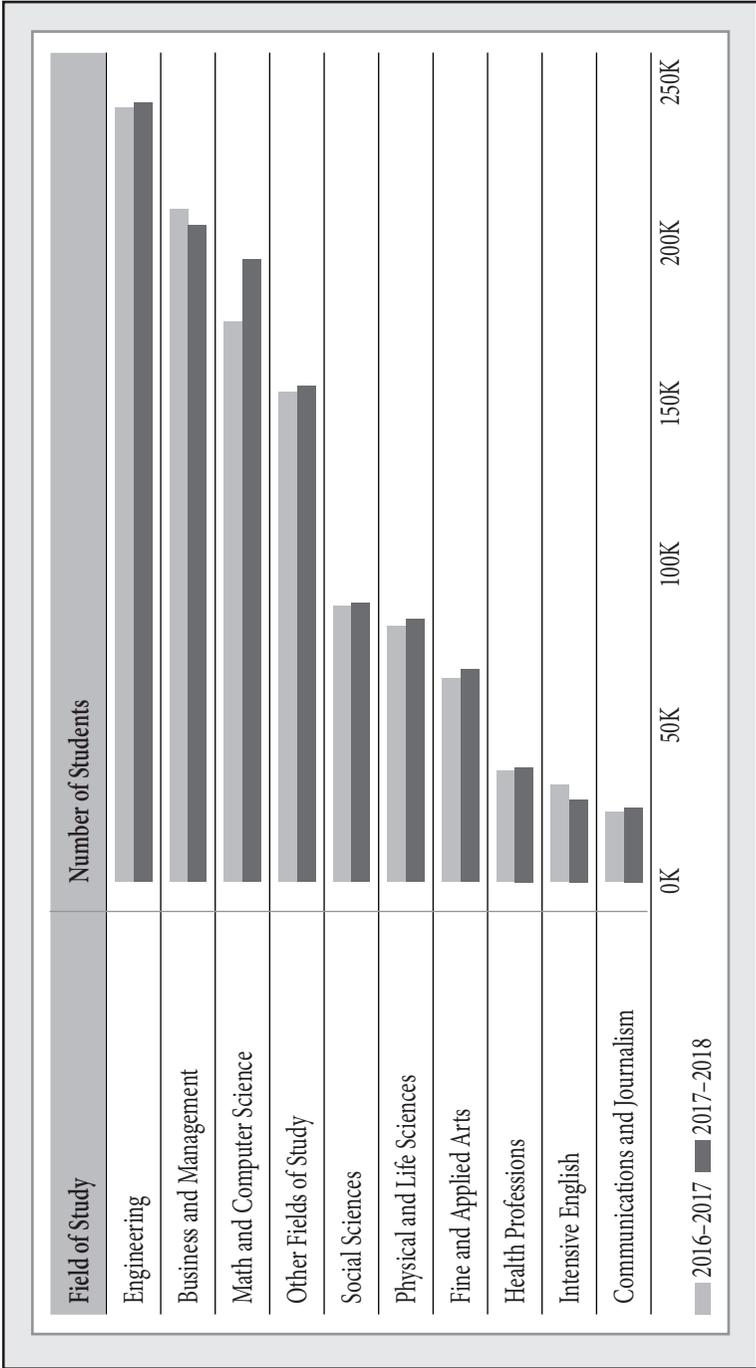


FIGURE 2. INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS' FIELDS OF STUDY, SY 2016-17 vs. SY 2017-2018



(OPT) temporary employment status for 24 months after graduation. Students from different countries of origin often pursue different majors. For instance, a majority of students from India (80%), Iran (79%), Nepal (65%), and Kuwait (64%) in 2016–2017 were in STEM fields versus just 16% of students from Japan and 20% of those from the United Kingdom and Germany (“International Students by Field”).

International students represent an ever-increasing and diversifying population on our campuses, but they have the potential to become important honors partners who can also generate and invigorate honors internationalization efforts. While international students can benefit from their involvement in honors, relatively few international students appear to be involved in U.S. honors programs. At the past four NCHC conferences, 118 presentations had international themes, but only seven focused on international students and honors. Four presentations gave primary attention to assisting international students’ transition into U.S. institutions (Bellu and Medina; Larsen and Van der Sluis; Phillips; and Sun et al.), and Kuong and her colleagues focused on challenges faced by international honors students at Columbia College, Temple University, and Hillsborough Community College. Kulesa and Lara described their efforts to forge a partnership between the honors administration and the International Affairs office that created pairings between university students and international community members. Finally, Uteuova presented specific marketing strategies one might employ to achieve higher yields of international students. While these presentations offered numerous replicable ideas, their focus was on what institutions can do for international students rather than on what international students can contribute to honors.

INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS’ CONTRIBUTIONS TO CAMPUS LIFE

Given the growing international student population in the U.S., it stands to reason that international students offer tremendous potential to enrich campus communities. Honors directors, honors faculty, and honors students would do well to help international

students discern their passions and assist them in finding appropriate contexts to employ their gifts.

My campus boasts a robust Honors Student Association (HSA), which is organized into multiple committees based on student passions. Carl's first contribution to honors came when he spearheaded the formation of a new HSA international outreach committee. To a packed audience, he delivered a lecture, "A Norwegian's Perspective of Americans," and he facilitated a lively follow-up discussion. He received uproarious applause when he noted, "As Americans you fit all the impressions of hospitality and for being loud." Carl forged a relationship between honors and our campus international student body; honors became known as a welcoming place for international students. Carl also became known to our university administration, serving as an ambassador for honors with the Office of International Studies. His presence reinforced the positive impact of honors from a unique perspective by articulating how international students gained value from their participation in honors education. Carl took full advantage of honors-sponsored international experiences, traveling on honors study abroad programs to Russia and South Africa. His contributions during the programs' debriefing sessions deepened and broadened the conversations as he challenged peers and faculty to view their international experiences through a more global lens.

Not all honors directors will find themselves fortunate enough to have a Carl come to their office. Yet Carl's engagement on our campus provides clear strategies directors can embrace as they seek to involve their universities' international student population. Directors should begin with the offices of admissions and international programs, obtaining a list of international students' names, countries of origin, planned lengths of stay at the institution, and contact information. Depending on the honors curricular structure, directors can investigate opportunities for qualified international students to enroll in honors seminars, be guest speakers for honors courses, participate in study abroad programs, and serve as consultants for planned travel to a region of the world where they might hold, at minimum, cultural expertise. If curricular opportunities

are not immediately obvious, they might consider ways to integrate international students into co-curricular elements of honors. Welcoming international students into honors social and service activities creates space for dialogue between native and international students. Through such experiences, notes organizational development and civic engagement consultant Peter Block, students “discover that individual concerns are more universal than imagined . . . [they recognize] we are not alone” (95). We have begun implementing these practices in our own program; they do not happen overnight, they occur in incremental steps, and they often do not produce immediate results. The greatest “post-Carl” insight, worthy of sharing with all program directors, rests in the value of recognizing this far too frequently overlooked population of students who can both benefit from and enhance the honors community.

PROGRAMMING FACILITATED BY INTERNATIONAL ALUMNI

Upon his graduation in May 2014, Carl said, “Thanks for all honors has done for me. I hope one day to show you Norway.” That gracious offer came in spring 2014 during a site visit in preparation for a proposed study abroad program to Norway in 2015. Dr. Greg Weisenstein, president of West Chester University, served as a board member of the American College of Norway (ACN). Through his assistance, we made arrangements with ACN to serve as our host site for our study abroad program in Norway in 2015. In turn, ACN reached out to our mutual alumni, Carl, to serve as the primary liaison between our two institutions.

During the site visit, Carl used his contacts not only to show us the central tourist sites of Oslo and the surrounding areas but also to find opportunities for interpersonal engagement. Sustained interactions with cultural others prove essential to creating transformational opportunities for students (Dean and Jendzur-ski 9–11). Such a moment came when we met with Dr. Asle Toje, Director of Research at the Norwegian Nobel Institute (NNI). From the exchange, the NNI offered to facilitate a three-hour session at the NNI for our students. Most student programming occurs at an

impressive visitors' center located on the picturesque plaza adjacent to Oslo's landmark City Hall. We were offered a relatively unprecedented opportunity to meet at the NNI building instead.

The 2015 study abroad program consisted of twenty-six students representing thirteen Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education (PASSHE) institutions and three West Chester faculty. The students spent a week of orientation and "academic boot camp" on West Chester's campus before a ten-day program in Norway. Students took two honors classes: Environmental and Sustainability Lessons from Norway and A Nobel Ideal: Lessons of Leadership through Nobel Peace Laureates.

The leadership course required students to select a Nobel Peace Prize recipient as a case study for leadership. In addition to traditional biographical and contextual research dealing with the laureate's background and cause, students completed a rhetorical analysis of the individual's acceptance speech delivered at the annual award presentation ceremony in December. Class members were also afforded an unprecedented opportunity to collectively nominate a candidate for the 2016 Nobel Peace Prize; this honor is traditionally reserved for past laureates, heads of state, senior politicians, and full professors in a limited number of academic disciplines.

The preparation for the meeting with the NNI staff, scheduled for the third morning of our study abroad program, followed a full day of activities in Oslo. Students, traveling by bus from Oslo to their overnight accommodations at ACN in Moss, arrived at eight o'clock in the evening. They were instructed to assemble in our central meeting room thirty minutes later to prepare questions for the NNI staff should an opportunity for engagement arise. Needless to say, this request was not met with enthusiasm, and the students worked on their questions until close to eleven o'clock that night. Each student wrote a potential question on a note card that was subsequently shared with the whole group. Students with similar themes caucused in small groups to collaborate and refine their question. From the eight themed groups, the students selected the three most insightful questions. Throughout the tedious process,

Carl continually affirmed the disgruntled students' work, reinforcing the notion that their efforts represented time well spent.

The bus to the NNI in Oslo departed at 7:30 the next morning, and we arrived at our meeting at ten o'clock. The students were greeted by Dr. Toje and ushered into a rectangular room, dominated by a large dark wood conference table fitted with seats to accommodate the group. Artwork celebrating each Nobel Peace Prize laureate, created by Norwegian artists, decorated the walls. As I was about to enter the room, a staff member pulled me aside to share, "This is highly unusual, you know. We don't do this sort of programming."

The first NNI speaker began by saying, "I expect, as young people, you lack familiarity with Nobel and his prizes. I have prepared remarks to read. Should any time remain, I will address any questions, should you have any." The lecture lasted nearly fifty minutes; the presenter then offered to take one or two questions from our students. Three students' hands shot up. With an air of surprise, the speaker recognized a student who posed a question. With even greater surprise, our host responded, "That is a most thoughtful question!" A second student then began, "I have a question concerning textual authenticity." It turned out the audio version of the Nobel Prize recipient's speech that the student analyzed did not match the textual version. While there were several differences, one of the most concerning occurred when the laureate, coming from a country known for its oppression of women, claimed in the audio recording, "mine is a very *patriarchal* nation." In the written text, the student noted, the word "patriarchal" is replaced with "patriotic." The speaker replied by assuring the student no such clerical error was possible. The student responded, "Oh, I got the recording and the text from the NNI website." The question period ended, we had a break, and the speaker exited. He returned some forty minutes later, apologizing to the student. Having checked the website, he affirmed her insight and pledged to correct the error.

The second part of our program at the NNI involved deliberations on the top candidates the students had identified as viable nominees for the Nobel Peace Prize. Drawing on their earlier research and presentations, the students narrowed the list of contenders to the top

two prospects. Dr. Toje, keenly familiar with the deliberative process of the Nobel Peace Prize Committee, served as facilitator during the discussion and asked the group penetrating questions. After reaching a final decision on their nominee, the students crossed the hall to the NNI press briefing room, a large room with auditorium-style seating facing a center podium, embossed with the Nobel medallion insignia. Students took turns standing at the podium, where chairs of the Nobel Committee have stood for decades and announced the recipients of the Nobel Peace Prize to the world.

As we left the NNI, the staff member who had spoken to me when we arrived said, “Your students were most impressive. You are welcome back.” On the bus, students were initially filled with awe by what just transpired. One student spoke up, “It sure was a good move for us to practice those questions last night.” What a teaching moment. From this experience, honors students not only learned about the inner workings of arguably the “world’s most prestigious prize” (Heffermehl xi), but they also absorbed an essential life lesson concerning the value of preparation.

That evening, Carl’s parents graciously hosted a dinner for the students at their home just outside of Oslo. Invited guests included Dr. Toje and Mrs. Inger-Marie Ytterhorn, one of the five members of the Nobel Peace Prize selection committee. She met with students and fielded numerous questions. In addition to hosting the dinner, Carl’s parents also helped to arrange favorable hotel rates for our group and a substantial discount for our bus travel. Beyond networking with the NNI, Carl assisted in building a partnership relation with Friends of Østensjø Lake, a private preservationist group dedicated to championing the environmental sustainability of a freshwater lake and its rich biosphere on the outskirts of Oslo. He also helped gain access to a public school where our students interacted with Norwegian faculty and students. Carl even arranged for the group to sail into a fjord on a to-scale model of a Viking ship. The experience came complete with period costume drummers who beat a steady rhythm as students stroked oars, providing the power to sail.

These anecdotes illustrate the tremendous value international honors alumni can play in invigorating global education. Travel guidebook author Rick Steves emphasizes the importance of choosing the designation of *traveler*, those who take time to embrace their environment through a myriad of experiences, over *tourist*, individuals who simply see the sites. Often our alumni, in their desire to give back to the honors programs that nurtured them in the U.S., can utilize their networking power in their home countries to provide access to opportunities and individuals far from the traditional tourist track, affording students a true choice between traveler and tourist.

World Vision senior director and author Corey Trenda notes, “The surest way to continue having an impact after your cross-cultural encounter is to intentionally foster ongoing connections with the people and places you visited or with the issues that affect them” (68). Upon returning home, we remained in email contact with several individuals we met in Norway. In a subsequent dialogue with Dr. Toje, we extended an invitation to the Director of the NNI to visit our campus. Although a scheduling conflict ultimately prevented the visit, as students and faculty shared their Norway experiences with others, we were motivated to extend the academic opportunities that we had developed for the Norway study abroad program to our home campus. In fall 2015 and fall 2016, we offered modified versions of the environmental seminar and Nobel leadership course that we had initially offered in Norway. (For a copy of the syllabus for these courses, contact the author.)

Our hopes for further direct contact with the NNI resurfaced with the news Carl had been selected for an NNI internship. Before our 2015 study abroad program, Carl had no direct contact with the NNI. Through his work to prepare for the program on our behalf, he built his own relationship with the NNI, and he credits our program for creating the exigency for him to initiate this connection. The internship became part of his master’s degree program at the University of Oslo. We are proud that our honors college continues helping our alumni with their lifelong intellectual and experiential growth.

We continued sharing our ongoing commitment to keep the lessons we learned in Norway alive and our desire to engage additional students with Carl and others in Norway. Persistence often produces positive outcomes, and our continued dialogue resulted in an invitation for me and a senior university administrator to travel to Oslo for a meeting with Dr. Olav Njølstad, Director of the NNI. The meeting solidified our institution's commitment to engage our students in the serious study of the Nobel Peace Prize and communicate that sincerity to our Norwegian hosts. Dr. Njølstad invited students to again submit, through appropriate channels, a nominee for the Peace Prize and attempted a second time to arrange a visit to our campus.

Once again schedule conflicts prevented Dr. Njølstad's visit, so he offered to facilitate a visit by Dr. Henrik Syse, Vice Chair of the Nobel Committee. In spring 2018, Dr. Syse came to campus and delivered a public lecture to some three hundred students, faculty, and community guests. He visited classes, engaged in small group sessions with honors student leaders, and met with the university president, faculty who traveled to Norway, the director of the Center for International Programs, and the director of the Peace and Conflict Studies Program. As his visit concluded, we broached the possibility of bringing a second group of honors students to Norway with an eye toward more in-depth focus on the Nobel Peace Prize and subsequent lessons in leadership and global citizenship. To achieve our goal of interpersonal engagement, we also discussed opportunities for interaction between American and Norwegian students.

A presentation at the United Nations brought Dr. Syse back to the U.S. in September 2018. His visit coincided with our second offering of the honors Nobel course. Having a "free" day, Dr. Syse offered to return to our campus. He interacted with honors student leaders and delivered a public lecture that drew over two hundred students on a Friday night. At the conclusion of his visit, Dr. Syse invited us to bring five students to Oslo in December to participate in the festivities surrounding the presentation ceremony for the 2018 Nobel Peace Prize honorees, Denis Mukwege and Nadia

Murad. We quickly alerted Carl, now a staff member at the Norwegian Storting, the country's parliament. Carl collaborated with NNI staff to refine our itinerary and made himself available as a city guide during our visit. In December 2018, our students found themselves, as Carl had in 2012, strangers in a new country, standing on the threshold of a doorway to unimagined opportunities.

CONCLUSION

The increasing number of international students attending our institutions, many of high academic ability, can find honors a useful tool to assist their acclimation to American higher education. Honors can provide international students with a supportive environment as they transition to a new culture, and it can afford them multiple avenues for curricular and co-curricular engagement. In return, honors directors will discover that this dynamic population of learners can help internationalize honors and the greater campus community. Directors who embrace building relationships with international students must do so realizing they are often stepping into uncharted and ambiguous territory, which demands a blend of creativity, flexibility, and patience. It can involve following multiple leads, exploring lofty aspirations, developing a skill for modification, and realizing they must sacrifice the need for a reliable GPS instrument that guarantees arrival at a specific destination at a specific time and offers obstacle alerts along the way; no such certainty exists. I could have never imagined where the initial conversation with Carl would lead, nor can I predict where the relationship will take us in the years ahead. Because I am an intense planner who likes to see quick results, working with our Norway partners has taught me the valuable lesson of remaining calm, and if I am honest, I am still learning to be calm and patient.

In Robert Frost's "The Road Not Taken," he memorably pens how two roads meet in a wood and how his choosing the one less traveled made all the difference. The intentional choice by honors directors to reach out to international students can have a tremendous and positive impact on the honors community. International students can enrich academic discussions with their global perspectives.

International students can provide the first point of global contact for many U.S. students. Through these international peers, less cosmopolitan American students can personally connect with individuals from the outside world, from an increasingly globalized society. International students also have the potential to dramatically boost global networking opportunities for honors programs, enhancing the honors campus community and future honors study abroad programs. The courage they exhibit in embracing global study opportunities may provide the catalyst to motivate reluctant American students to see and travel beyond their borders. Through a commitment to interpersonal engagement, program sustainability, and persistence, dreams of internationalization can reach fruition.

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