Marking International Education Week in Montana
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Abraham Kim, Ph.D.
Mansfield Center, University of Montana

Last week while visiting Beijing, China, I appreciated once again how large our world is and, at the same time, how small it is as well. While scaling the Great Wall and walking through the grandiose imperial palace of the Forbidden City, I was reminded how historically rich and culturally diverse the global community is outside of the United States. At the same time, as I passed the bustling streets of this metropolis of 21 million people buzzing with market activities, I also realized how interconnected our worlds are. What is occurring in Asia thousands of miles away from the United States matters in Montana in many different ways. With the free flow of global commerce, communication, and travel, we are all linked together. These realities are often not fully appreciated until one travels abroad and experiences new cultures and new societies. That is why Montanans, especially our students, should travel abroad to study and experience as much as they can to expand their perspectives and better understand the diversity of our world. This message seems a propos this week as we mark “international education week” at schools and universities across the United States.

Recent trends at American universities suggest that going abroad to study is increasingly becoming an integral part of curriculums to prepare students for their careers. Because our society is becoming more multicultural and our work places are becoming more globalized, future professionals will need to be better equipped to work with people that come from varied cultures, values, and languages. Certainly, studying abroad and living in foreign countries are all great training to prepare for this increasingly complex future work environment. A 2013 report released by the Institute of International Education, a leading research institute on
global education, shows encouraging news that more than 280,000 American students are going abroad to take courses and enroll in schools. This shows growth of more than 300% over the last 20 years. Montana has also shown significant growth in the number of college students going abroad. In 2011, 513 students went overseas. This jumped to more than 650 Montanan students in 2012.

Although this growth is very encouraging by Montanan standards, when compared nationally, the Big Sky state has a long ways to go before it can catch up with other states. For example, many state universities such as University of Minnesota and Michigan State each send more than 2500 students abroad every year. If we are to prepare Montanan students to be more competitive in our globalizing economy, we need to do a better job in encouraging, inspiring and supporting our students to think and to go global. This endeavor should not just focus at the college level, but should start as early as elementary schools teaching young students foreign languages and cultures to expose them to our multi-dimensional world at a young age.

On the other side of the spectrum are the foreign students coming to the United States. According to the Institute of International Education, the U.S. is still viewed as the land of educational opportunities and attracts more than 819,000 university students from all over the world.

These thriving foreign students are contributing in numerous ways to their host communities. Economically, foreign students injected more than $24 billion to the U.S. economy in 2012. In addition to economic benefits, incoming foreign students have filled the increasing need in this country for more students in the science and technology fields. Furthermore, international students have connected the world to our U.S. classrooms and diversified our communities across the country. These foreign students are often the most promising young people in their
respective countries and are anticipated to return back to their home nations to become the next generation of political, business and academic leaders. In the U.S. academies, these emerging leaders are building relationships with their American peers and forming a deeper understanding of the United States. This people-to-people engagement in our schools may be one of the most effective forms of public diplomacy in reinforcing U.S. foreign relations in the long-term.

Despite these clear benefits, the state of Montana collectively is only attracting approximately 1,600 foreign college students each year. Even with these comparatively small numbers, incoming students have been a boost to our state economy by contributing more than $42 million in 2012. With the natural beauty of Montana, our world class universities, and being one of the most livable places in the U.S., there is much potential for growth. Looking ahead, the state and its universities may need to make a better effort in marketing to attract foreign students, in actively building relationships abroad with academic institutions in key markets like China and South Korea, and in aggressively expanding exchange programs to draw students and professionals to Montana.

In conclusion, as we mark “international education week” in Montana, this is a great opportunity to reflect on how we can energize our schools to substantively promote global education so that more of our students go abroad and to attract increasing numbers of foreign students here. In the end, these efforts will not only enrich our communities and educational system with diverse cultures and new talents, but will also contribute to the overall welfare of our great state.