

From Kaysville to Kenya

On Friday, Weber State University will conduct its 137th commencement ceremony. In 1896, the first year WSU conferred degrees, there were three graduates. By 1921 this number had grown to slightly more than 100. In 2011, WSU will confer more than 4,000 degrees.

In the 19th century and for the better part of the 20th century, virtually all of the degrees awarded by WSU were conferred to residents of Utah. In fact, most degrees were awarded to residents of Weber County. On Friday, the majority of the degrees will still be conferred to Utah residents, but there will also be a significant number of degrees awarded to students from Brazil, Canada, China, Germany, Kenya, Saudi Arabia, Taiwan, and other countries.

On a surprisingly regular basis, I am asked why WSU bothers to recruit international students. The underlying assumption seems to be that because WSU is a Utah university it should focus exclusively on educating students from Utah.

There are several answers to this question. One answer is that domestic students learn about different cultures by interacting with students from different cultures. This response is true, but it is also incomplete. The best international students not only further understanding of their own cultures, they also enrich the general intellectual discourse on campus.

Consider a simple analogy. No one would expect a college football coach to field a competitive team if they confined their recruiting efforts to a 20-mile radius around campus.

It is taken for granted that coaches need to go wherever needed to find the

most talented players. Since coming to WSU coach Ron McBride has recruited numerous players from the South Pacific, and no one in under the mistaken impression that his primary goal is to deepen the fans' appreciation of Polynesian culture. He is looking for talent.

Talented athletes not only contribute to the team through their own efforts, they also increase the performance of other players on the team. You know this if you have ever played a sport with someone a little more talented than yourself. Playing with, or against, a talented player forces you to raise the level of your own game.

The same is true in the classroom, laboratory, and concert hall. This year at WSU, students from Shanghai studied economics alongside students from Ogden. A pianist from Taiwan performed a duet with a student from Idaho. Science students from Box Elder County did field work with students in Mexico. These experiences have enhanced Utah students' capabilities in music, business, and the sciences.

It is also worth noting that the contribution international students bring to the campus does not cost Utah taxpayers a dime. By state law, international students must pay the full cost of their education with no subsidy from taxpayers. This means that the cost of tuition for international students is more than twice the cost for Utah residents, while enriching the learning experience for everyone on campus.

As the New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman incessantly reminds us, today's students will need to function in a global society and compete in an international economy. The college classroom is a good place for the global experience to begin.

Top of Utah Voices



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Michael Vaughan

Commentary

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