

Higher Education: A Keystone in U.S.- India Relations

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Op-Ed

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America wants to open its doors even wider to students from India, and we want more American young people to travel to India to study and learn. The United States and India are engaging more actively and constructively than ever before on a wide range of issues, and we believe our educational partnership is critical. India is already number one in the world in sending students to the United States for higher education and we want to build on this strength for the benefit of the next generation of Indians and Americans.

To strengthen our collaboration, I am traveling to India March 26-29 with a unique delegation of leaders from America's higher education institutions. The delegation -- which represents the great diversity of American higher educational opportunities, from community colleges to large research universities -- will bring a clear message: America wants to expand educational collaboration with India.

Our goal is to build on the tradition of Indian students studying side-by-side with American students. We believe that the free flow of ideas, the exchange of information, and shared opportunities for discovery are the glue that can bind and strengthen our bilateral relationship. America's prestigious scholarly exchange program, the Fulbright Program, has already enabled generations of Indian and American scholars to learn from each other and build lasting academic and personal relationships. This truly invaluable experience needs the support of both our governments, as well our private sectors.

The mothers and fathers of Indian students, just like parents in the United States, believe education is key to building a better life. All these families, who want their children well-prepared for our globalized world, are urging educational institutions to expand the scope of affordable education options, broadening our students' opportunities to succeed.

To provide more options for study, the State Department recently has launched new community college initiatives to introduce more foreign students to our quality network of American community colleges, which can provide job-related training in convenient campus locations. We are sponsoring new science awards to stimulate cutting-edge science study and more arts programs to provide more creative opportunities.

Study abroad is becoming an essential component for success in the competitive global environment. We are seeing high rates of growth in the number of Americans coming to India for study, while Indian students are the largest community of international students on U.S. campuses for the fifth year in a row. We welcome these students, along with the more than 560,000 students from other nations, for the energy and academic ability they add to American education.

The education leaders traveling with me want to build on America's foundation as the world's premier destination for high quality educational opportunities and we want more students in India to know about the variety of choice and cost that is available in the United States - from technical and trade schools to liberal arts colleges to large advanced research universities. We will be meeting with government officials, university administrators, business leaders and young people to discuss how institutions from the two countries – both governmental and educational - can best meet student needs and expectations.

Students recognize that global challenges demand global solutions and international higher education needs to respond to this knowledge imperative. Students are clamoring for greater access to higher educational institutions. They want global skills from these institutions, and look for freedom of mobility to enable them to move from one institution to another, and one nation to another, collaborating across disciplines, faculties and borders. The students understand that the global knowledge society knows no boundaries. Now it remains for governments and higher educational institutions - working in partnership with the private sector - to match their students' ambitions.

U.S. President George W. Bush and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice have already made it a priority to work with universities and other nations to find solutions to this challenge. President Bush is particularly interested in India, because he firmly agrees with Prime Minister Singh's view that India and the United States are "natural partners" whose futures will be entwined. The past few years have seen an explosion of business ties in which Indian and American businesses have found new, productive ways to work together effectively. That rapid growth is fueling a demand for staff and managers who know how to work together.

Much like their business counterparts, American universities are exploring new strategies for collaboration. Our delegation wants to establish relationships that enable universities from the U.S. and India to work even more closely together.

We look forward to exploring news ways to strengthen the important partnership between the people of the United States and the people of India. We believe that education and exchange programs are natural bridges, and the best thing about them is that you can cross them both ways.

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