

Midlands Voices: Strategy takes shape for global education

BY JAMES B. MILLIKEN AND THE REV. JOHN P. SCHLEGEL

The writers, respectively, are the presidents of the University of Nebraska and Creighton University.

A few days ago, we participated in the first U.S. University Presidents Summit on International Education, convened by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings.

The meeting was designed to "engage leaders of U.S. higher education in a renewed partnership to strengthen international education, emphasizing its importance to the national interest."

This subject's importance to the administration was demonstrated by the involvement of the president, who announced a new language initiative, and the first lady, who told the group about the importance of programs such as the one at the University of Nebraska at Omaha that helps prepare Afghan women teachers.

(This was one of only a few "best practices" cited by administration leaders. It was particularly heartening for us to have Laura Bush tell our peers from across the country that she met with the Afghan teachers as they left the country and that they could not say enough positive things about their experiences and the warmth of the Nebraska host families.)

While the impressive guest list demonstrated a high level of administration interest, the most important test of commitment will be the actions following the summit. Given the statements by the administration and the university participants, we are encouraged.

Some results are immediate, such as the announcement by the president of his new National Security Language Initiative, a "plan to further strengthen national security and prosperity in the 21st century through education, especially in developing foreign language skills."

The program will focus on significantly increasing the number of Americans who speak Arabic, Chinese, Russian, Hindi, Farsi and others. While this initiative is an important part of an overall strategy in international education, it is only a part. It was clear that the university presidents and administration leaders saw the need for a broader agenda.

We left with a sense of consensus on several key points, all of which are valuable in guiding strategic planning.

- First, there was general agreement that Thomas L. Friedman's case that "the world is flat" - outlined in a new book by the New York Times columnist - provides

urgency for engagement on international education. The convergence of a number of factors - including vastly improved technology, reductions in trade barriers and changes in political and economic freedom throughout the world - has led, in Friedman's view, to a flat world or level playing field.

On this field, other countries are proving adept at competing, adopting our education and innovation models and, in some cases, beating us at our own game. In addition, there are challenges to national security that could be addressed, in part, by more robust international education.

- Second, a number of important elements to "international education" require our attention as a nation - some of which must be addressed by the federal government, some by colleges and universities and some by both. The increased emphasis on foreign language is one. (For our part, we recognize that relaxing foreign language requirements in our schools and colleges is not a positive trend.)

Another element is the education of more foreign nationals at U.S. institutions. Secretary Rice pointed to improvements in visa processing and committed to further efforts that are consistent with the critical obligation to safeguard the nation.

Another important dimension of improving international education is to encourage experience abroad as an integral part, not a frill, of higher education for U.S. students. This should go far beyond current participation levels and the relative comfort of western European and English-speaking countries. Financial support will be critical to ensure that the experience of studying abroad is not available only to students of means.

Additionally, we must build the global competence of our students, in part through changes to the curriculum, to ensure that there is a global context in all areas of study.

- Third, it was agreed that higher education is one of the most attractive assets the United States has to offer the world and that one reason our "system" of higher education has been so successful is in part because there is no national system.

Higher education in this country is the best in the world and has attracted many of the most creative thinkers in large part because of its diversity, its independence and its culture of openness and freedom of thought.

While recognizing the implications of the flat world and pursuing important goals to improve international education, we must protect those characteristics that make American higher education the magnet for talent that it has been and the key to continued American leadership that it promises to be.