

Sen. Norm Coleman urges easing foreign student visa requirements

By Robb Murray Free Press Staff Writer [published in The Free Press, Mankato, MN]

Photo by John Cross



U.S. Sen. Norm Coleman held a summit at Minnesota State University on the plight of international students who experience difficulty trying to enter the United States. MSU President Richard Davenport is next to Coleman.

MANKATO — To understand the profound impact international students have on American higher education, you need look no further than Minnesota State University.

The student senate president and the Homecoming King are from Pakistan. The student senate vice president is from Croatia. The Homecoming Queen is from Peru. And even though the number of international students is decreasing, they make up a third of the entire student senate.

That kind of impact is why U.S. Sen. Norm Coleman - at MSU Friday to discuss the United States' declining international student population - wants to overhaul the bureaucracy international students must wade through in order to enroll in American colleges and universities.

The situation, worsened by a 9/11-driven fear that has resulted in intense security checks for many students, has prompted many international students to seek higher education elsewhere. As a result, countries such as England and Australia have seen their international student numbers rise while American numbers sink.

At MSU in 2002-2003 there were 592 international students. In 2003-2004, there were 558. This year that number has dropped to 478. Coleman, a first-term Republican, hopes his bill - the American Competitiveness Through International Openness Now (ACTION) Act - can change that.

"International students become ambassadors for life for this country," he said.

He's proposing loosening the requirement on in-person embassy visits students must make to file paperwork, be interviewed by government officials.

But the goal Friday, he said, was to listen. He heard from students and administrators.

Indonesian student Andy Lie said security issues delayed his master's program by a full year. He not only suffered the delay, but that delay also cost him part of his teaching assistantship.

"I'm a good student," he told Coleman, "and I was nearly forced to continue my education elsewhere."

Math professor Pavil Kitsul reminded Coleman that "welcoming international talent has always been America's strength," and mentioned a handful of international students who went on to achieve greatness.

MSU Vice President for Academic Affairs Scott Olson said staff in the international student office commit between 40 and 50 hours each week to dealing with students who are having trouble with visas or with their security clearance.

Olson said MSU is proud of how many students study abroad. But for those who can't, the international students who come here are very important.

"International education, for domestic students, comes via interaction with international students," Olson said.

Coleman answered each speaker with reassuring words that he'll do what he can to improve the process. He also reminded people that there is good reason for being mindful of security: Several of the 9/11 hijackers were in the United States on student visas.

Still, Coleman said, there should be some common sense in the process as well, so that people such as Andy Lie don't have their lives on hold for nothing.

Perhaps the most moving testimonial came from Gladys Olson, a woman who has been passionately involved with international students for 37 years.

Olson said she's hosted dozens of students over the years, but one in particular illustrated the impact of the program.

The student, from Nigeria, lived happily with the Olsons but, at some point had to borrow some money from them. Even though it was against the school's policy, the Olsons lent the money.

Years later, on the day her husband died, Olson received a letter in the mail from that student. In front of his name, however, was "Dr." And inside the envelope was a check for the amount he'd borrowed years earlier.

Said Olson, "It was a little bit of joy on the saddest day of my life."