USC Has Global Strategy to Enroll New Trojans

By Rebecca Trounson
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Benard Poernomo came from Indonesia to attend USC because of the quality of its business school and active, well-placed alumni network.

The warm Southern California climate tipped the balance for Ashwin Bhatnagar, a graduate student from India. "I checked out the weather charts before I came," Bhatnagar, 22, said, a little sheepishly.

For Andrea Lau, a Canadian of Chinese descent, the key was USC's large, vibrant population of foreign students. "I knew I'd feel comfortable here," said Lau, 20, a junior studying business administration. "You look at the numbers and you know USC is an international place."

And more so every year.

Aided by strong recruiting and an international base of fiercely loyal alumni, USC for the third year in a row is the nation's leader in enrolling foreign students, according to a recent survey. More than 6,600 were enrolled at the Los Angeles school in the last academic year, significantly more than those next on the list: Columbia, Purdue and New York universities.

The number at USC rose even as U.S. colleges and universities overall registered a drop in foreign enrollments. Experts attributed the national decline in part to tighter visa policies in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

Overseas students, representing more than 100 countries, now comprise more than 27% of USC's graduate student population and about 8% of undergraduates. Their numbers, along with the tuition dollars they bring in, have grown steadily since 1997 as USC has opened recruiting offices throughout Asia.

Across the campus, the foreign presence is evident. Clusters of Chinese students chat at tables near the student union. A panoply of languages spills from study groups meeting at Topping Student Activities Center. Indian, Indonesian and other foreign students linger on sunny afternoons at a tree-dotted plaza beside the School of Engineering.

Indian students make up USC's largest foreign contingent, so much so that a residential area north of the campus is described, by Indians and non-Indians alike, as "Little India."

"We're everywhere you look," says Bhatnagar of Bangalore, who is a graduate student in computer science.

A recent food tasting fair, sponsored by the International Students' Assembly, drew an estimated 2,000 faculty, staff and students to decorated booths near the center of campus. The dishes, provided by 15 "nationality" clubs, included curried goat from the Caribbean students, chicken satay from the Malaysians, spicy thin-crust pizza
from the Armenians and crepes from the French.

Between the booths, several Turkish students set up backgammon boards and a Scottish student played a bagpipe.

Many foreign students interviewed, especially those from English-speaking countries, said that their transition to USC had been relatively seamless, and that they had found it easy to make friends with American students as well as others from abroad.

"I completely feel at home here," said Ashanti Akabusi, 20, a junior from England who is studying English literature and communications. "Pretty much all my friends are American."

But other students, international and American alike, say that apart from the classroom, there's too little mixing of the various groups on campus. Many foreign students, especially those with large numbers at USC, live and socialize mainly with each another, several people said.

"We have a great international community here, but the integration isn't that much," said Jessica Lall, 20, a junior from Texas who works with foreign students as director of minority affairs for USC's student senate. "Too many groups stick to themselves."

Some students, including Bhatnagar, say they strive to reach out to those with different backgrounds. "It's not that easy, but I do it because I want to," he said. "A lot of people don't want to. But if you don't, you wouldn't really be away from home."

USC is not alone in pursuing foreign students, but its success has been aided by the climate and diverse cultural environment. Those factors make it seem more attractive than other parts of the U.S. to many Asian and Latin American students, education experts say.

USC also has large science, engineering and business programs that appeal to overseas graduate students. In addition, as a private university, USC does not face the political pressures to enroll Californians, particularly as undergraduates, that public universities do.

J. Michael Thompson, vice provost for enrollment management, said the university welcomed its first overseas students — from Japan — in the 1890s, little more than a decade after it opened.

But recruiting such students became a priority in 1994, Thompson said, as part of a strategy by university President Steven B. Sample to better position USC to teach about — and benefit from — the increasingly global economy.

Over the next several years, the university opened offices in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan and Singapore, which helped recruit faculty and students and support university researchers working in Asia. A Mexico City office is scheduled to open within months, as part of a new emphasis on Central and Latin America, Thompson said.

In Hong Kong, an active group of USC parents now helps lead admissions presentations for prospective students and their parents. For the last two years, several dozen members of the USC band have been flown to Hong Kong to perform in Chinese New Year celebrations.

The idea behind such efforts is to counter a perception since the 9/11 attacks that international students are not welcome in the U.S., Thompson said.

Foreign students — especially undergraduates, whose parents typically pay the full cost of their children's
education — are a significant source of income for American universities and their neighborhoods, representing nearly $13 billion annually, according to NAFSA: the Assn. of International Educators.

They are lucrative for USC too, representing more than $100 million annually to the university, according to Dixon Johnson, who heads its Office of International Services. But the reasons to recruit such students go well beyond the income they bring in, he and others said.

"We're preparing students for life in an increasingly interdependent world, where many of them are going to be doing business overseas or dealing with issues — terrorism, pollution, AIDS — that don't face just a single country," Johnson said. "Our students can learn from these students."

Foreign graduate students, especially in engineering and the sciences, also make up much of the research and teaching assistant workforce at USC and elsewhere.

USC and other universities also take seriously the role of helping future generations of foreign government and business leaders learn about the United States, a task they say has become even more critical in recent years.

"If we don't encourage these students to study here, they won't understand how America works," said Peggy Blumenthal, vice president for educational services at the New York-based Institute of International Education.

USC also walks its foreign students through the often-tricky details of the visa process and sends them a weekly newsletter that includes immigration and university updates, job tips and listings of cultural events.

International student enrollment on American campuses slipped 2.4% in the academic year that ended last spring — the first decline since 1971, according to a survey released this month by the Institute of International Education. Other studies suggest that the national decline has continued into the current school year.

Yet, USC's foreign enrollment for the last academic year was up 6%, and preliminary data for this year show it to be up again — by a few dozen students.

Over the years, USC and other American universities have seen overseas tensions or breakthroughs affect the mix of foreign students on campus.

Iranian students, for example, comprised the largest group of foreigners on U.S. campuses before the hostage crisis began in 1979, but their number plunged in its wake. In the last two years, the number of students from the Middle East, subject to newly intensive scrutiny in applying for U.S. visas, has declined substantially.

Taiwan was the top country of origin for foreign students at USC in the early 1980s, but has since slipped to fourth. After India, the largest number come from China, South Korea, Taiwan and Canada.

The university eases the transition to campus life for foreign students with a weeklong comprehensive orientation that for the first time this fall included a session on American football.

Some foreign students, such as Margie Pedder, 24, a senior from England, say they are bemused by the sport, with its complicated rules and stop-and-start action. "And it goes on for four hours!" she said, groaning.

But others regularly go to home games and say they are enjoying the Trojans' season with their team ranked No. 1.

USC's true spirit comes out at football games, said Poernomo, 21, sounding like a seasoned fan.
"You go to the stadium, you're wearing your USC shirt and you're yelling like everybody else," the Indonesian senior said, grinning. "It's really a bonding experience."

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