

US woos top Latin American students

US universities are 'open for business,' said US education secretary Margaret Spellings as she announced new student exchange initiatives this week.

The Christian Science Monitor
August 24, 2007

Santiago, Chile - When US Education Secretary Margaret Spellings arrived in Chile this week, she brought an important message.

The US wants "Chilean students to know that American higher education is open for business to students from our neighbors," said Ms. Spellings.

Her trip to South America this week is an attempt to attract students put off by lengthy visa delays in the years after 9/11.

While in Chile, she confirmed the creation of 100 annual scholarships for students who want to complete their doctorate studies in the United States, as well as future programs aimed at furthering education exchange between the two countries.

The initiatives will sponsor the best and brightest of Chile's students in an effort to open up opportunities that had until now been possible mainly for the country's elites.

The move reflects the Bush administration's interest in education and is part of a renewed US effort to win back hearts and minds in a region that it has been heavily criticized for ignoring, say analysts.

"Anything that the [US] can do to increase the number of Latin American students who study at US universities is going to be very positive," says Jeffrey Puryear, vice president for social policy at the Washington-based Inter-American Dialogue. "I think that the [Bush] administration is showing a concern to reaching out to Latin America. It is a win-win situation."

Looking toward the future

The recently announced scholarship program aims to draw potential PhD students who study in fields deemed to be pertinent for Chile's future, such as science and technology, public policy, environmental studies, education, and public health. The Chile program stipulates that participants return to Chile and work for at least two years after receiving their PhDs.

Aside from covering the costs of doctorate studies, the scholarship will also pay for predeparture English language training.

Chilean and US officials hope the language training will attract capable students from more modest backgrounds who ordinarily would not have the opportunity to study in the US.

"This way we can go beyond the usual candidates that would normally apply to a study abroad program," Spellings said.

Spellings told reporters Monday that there are also future plans in the works, such as teacher exchanges for both high school and university programs. She also said she was hopeful that Chileans would find jobs in both the public and private sectors upon returning to their home country.

This initiative comes as part of the US officials' increased emphasis on education as a centerpiece of foreign policy in the region.

"We have expanded the educational exchange program. We have tried to expand the notion of what cultural exchange is," explained Craig Kelly, former US ambassador to Chile, shortly before leaving his position in early August.

"Our focus on young people and on themes such as science and technology means that we are looking to the future. We already have good bilateral relations, and we are trying to ensure them for the future."

According to US embassy figures, the number of shorter-term J1 student visas (for exchange visitors participating in a program approved by the State Department) issued to Chileans has risen in recent years. However, only 1,000 longer-term F1 student visas were issued in 2006, as compared to 1,286 in 2001.

Aiming to win hearts and minds

Still, aside from aiming to boost the number of top quality Latin American students at US schools, experts confirm that Washington is aiming to soften its image in the region.

"Since President Bush's March visit to Latin America, there has been a rhetorical shift in US-Latin American relations to focus on social justice as a main US concern," says Shannon O'Neil, a Latin American studies fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations in Washington.

"The Bush administration hopes with its rhetorical shift to improve its relationship with Latin American countries by explicitly recognizing issues that matter to Latin Americans and their leaders," she says. "The importance of issues of poverty, inequality, safety, and economic opportunity were readily apparent in the campaigns of last year's numerous presidential elections [throughout the region]. US rhetoric – if not resources – is catching up with these realities."

Ms. O'Neil also points out that this effort is not very big in scale.

"Few new resources have been committed to programs to fulfill this rhetorical mandate," says O'Neil. "This new program is a case in point ... the US commitment is 100 more potential visas for pre-selected Chilean students."

Chilean students are excited

In spite of the Bush administration's low popularity in the region, Chilean students view this initiative as a harbinger of change.

"Today, the majority of the people who study abroad have already studied at private schools and come from a well-off socioeconomic background. Chileans who have gotten their advanced degrees abroad have done so because they had studied English intensively since elementary school," says Hector Madrid, who is interested in pursuing an advanced degree in psychology in the US.

Katherine Caceres, a student of political science at the Universidad de Chile in Santiago, says the new US program will help break down the language barrier.

"I think that these scholarships are a good idea for the main reason that they open doors for more students who would have not been able to study in the [US]," says Ms. Caceres. "They generate greater opportunities for people to develop their skills.

"In the past, many Chilean students have not had access to an education in the US because of the language. English is a big issue for students such as myself."

For some students, the ramifications of such scholarships would go beyond academics.

"These types of programs will certainly generate a more positive image of the United States among Chileans," says Hector Carbacho, who hopes to one day earn a PhD in Social Psychology in the US. "Many people already know the [US] to be one of the richest and most powerful nations in the world. It would be good to see that country helping developing countries."