

# American Undergraduate Education from an International Perspective

Horace H. Underwood

Director, Division of International Education  
Yonsei University

## Introduction

In America one should begin with a joke; in Korea one should begin with an apology. Since I am in Korea, I should apologize. I have no qualifications for being asked to write other than being American and having attended an undergraduate college in America many many years ago.

On the other hand, I have spent the last nine years in international education. I deal with American undergraduate education daily in the form of American students studying at Yonsei and by sending Yonsei students to American undergraduate institutions as exchange students. Thus my focus in this paper is comparative, on American and Korean undergraduate education. As prof. Dai-Kwon Choi said in his research proposal, a de facto comparison is implicit in all we are doing.

As a result, my focus is not on the disciplines which are taught, but on the culture in which they are taught. I notice that there are many papers on the individual disciplines of American undergraduate education. Such a focus on the disciplines is not wrong, but it implies an emphasis on undergraduate education as product, the knowledge which is obtained. Such knowledge cannot be separated from its context. My focus is on the context the process, the culture, of American undergraduate education.

## I. Korean vs American Undergraduate Education

Korea used to send primarily graduate students to study in the U.S. These students were widely admired and sought out by U.S. universities. In fact, graduate education is part of a guild system, surviving from the middle ages, in which graduate students are the apprentices, non-tenured faculty (or in Korea, part-time faculty) are the journeymen, and

tenured faculty are the masters. In this system, Korean students in American universities made excellent, hardworking apprentices.

Apprentices are understood already to be part of the profession, even if only beginning. But now Korea is sending more and more undergraduates to American universities. Undergraduates are not part of the guild; they are the customers. What are they customers of? What are they buying, as undergraduates in America? Or, what is the purpose of an undergraduate education?

Historically, there have been different answers for different continents. In a highly simplified form, the differences are expressed in three alliterated words: culture, certification, competence.

In Europe, undergraduate education was designed to give some culture to the ruling class. As Matthew Arnold said, the ruling class were barbarians—the ones with the swords—and an education could make them statesmen, or at least give a veneer of civilization.

In Korea, for 500 years if not 5,000, the purpose of education was to pass a test and thus acquire certification, a necessity for the only job worth having, government service. As my father, Horace G. Underwood, has said, “Education was treasured not so much for its content or applicability as for its social function.”

Finally, in America, education was theoretically to produce competence. “What school you went to makes very little difference, after you have got out. What matters is what you know then.” Ironically, this quote is from William F. Buckley, whose ties with a specific university are famous, but it represents a view which is completely American—not European, and not Korean.

The U.S. has had some confusion among these three goals, in fact. Thus universities still have a liberal arts curriculum, even though it is often criticized as impractical. More practical subjects like business and engineering have at various times been both honored and despised.

I am a professor of English literature by trade. English departments study literature but talk about writing skills. In the 1970's, the age of relevance, the Modern Language Association (MLA) published a booklet called “English: The Pre-professional Major.” English, they said, though the most liberal of the liberal arts, will get you into law school or medical school or business school. American education has some ambiguity between competence and culture, and we are not immune to “certification” as well—otherwise

nobody would spend over \$100,000 to go to Harvard, where the actual undergraduate education is often poor, but where you become certified as a member of the American ruling class.

Competence, culture, and certification. Certified to be competent. But what about culture? What culture is taught? Of course, this is the subject of a very large struggle in the U.S. today. But since American educational institutions are in America, the values behind whatever is taught are American values.

American values are a very broad field, and over the years we have argued about them at the International Seminars of the American Studies Association of Korea. Many people have made a rough list of some values that Americans think important and that we want our educational institutions to teach. Dr. Jonathan Borden, Middle School Principal at Seoul Foreign School, the international school from which I graduated in 1960, recently wrote a brief article for some Korean parents describing what American values the school represents. He suggests that a good list would include: individuality, creativity, diversity, freedom of choice, flexibility, critical thinking, tolerance, and equality of opportunity. We don't always act up to these ideals, but they are in fact the ideals of American undergraduate education.

What are some ways these ideals are reflected in the actual process of undergraduate education? Many of the results are well known in Korea.

For instance, 50% of American high school graduates go on to college, but only 25% graduate. Freedom to apply; freedom to fail.

For instance, I chose my undergraduate major, which was history, because the history department only required 30 credits in the major, or 25% of my undergraduate education. (It took me four years to learn that I did not like history, and I went on to major in English literature in graduate school.) One of my sons changed his major three times. My daughter has transferred twice. My four children have attended a total of eight colleges.

Many students apply to as many as ten colleges. Anybody can get in to some college somewhere. My four children applied to 4, 5, 6, or 7 colleges, depending on their confidence, and mostly were accepted at all of them. But each child could only go to one of them. So American colleges only get a percentage of the students they accepted. Even Harvard only gets 75%. I repeat that for some of my Korean colleagues—25% of the students which Harvard accepts decide not to go there.

These values are coming to Korea. Students can already apply to four or five colleges; at

Yonsei University, starting next March, many students will enter with no major, but choose their majors in their second year. In the past, Korean education has always acted to limit the number of choices open to the student, to control rather than to liberate. The university admissions system here has existed for the convenience of the administration and faculty, not the students. Change took place on paper, but the bureaucracy always found a way to undercut the appearance of freedom of choice and preserve the system. Can they do it again? It is going to be an interesting time in Korean undergraduate education. As the Yonsei Annals, our campus English newspaper, noted, the system coming next March is a copy of the U.S. undergraduate system. The research done by the American Studies Institute on what happens in U.S. undergraduate education has turned out to be timely indeed.

Many of the differences revolve around flexibility and choice in education. Koreans seem to know in their bones there is only one way to success, one chance, and if you miss it, you will be a failure. Americans know in their bones that there are many choices before them, even if the opportunities are narrower now than 20 years ago. On a simple level, there are more urban centers; there is nothing like Seoul, with 40% of the population and 14 of the top 15 university English departments, as a recent survey indicated. If you don't get into college in one area in America, you can always try somewhere else.

To this extent William F. Buckley is right; not very many people care where you went to college. I went to Hamilton College, a small liberal arts college of less than 1,000 students when I attended. People who know about Hamilton nod approvingly when I say I went there—oh, yeah, Hamilton, good college, right. Most people do not care. I received an excellent education there, which prepared me for graduate school or for any job, but I have lost all track of all but a very few of my classmates. I still have the addresses of maybe two or three people, and I keep in touch with none at all. The undergraduate network is just not important in America.

Because the undergraduate network is unimportant, therefore America can have small liberal arts colleges. The quality of small liberal arts colleges is often unknown even by Korean professors who know a large number of major universities. In Korea, good means big; "If Hamilton College is so good, how come it's so small?" In 1988 my son David went to Swarthmore College. That year it was the top rated national liberal arts college in America. But some of my Korean friends, knowing I was from upstate New York as much as anywhere, said to me, "Why don't you send him somewhere good, like Syracuse

University?" As a Hamilton College graduate I have always had my doubts about Syracuse, so I found the comment particularly funny.

In fact, my son David was my best student and, applying from overseas, could probably have gotten into Harvard. I want to pick on Harvard one more time. I have always regretted not having him apply there, not that he would have gone if accepted, but that I would have been able to say the rest of my life, "Oh, my son was accepted at Harvard, but I wanted him to go somewhere better." I mean, of course, the small liberal arts college.

Freedom of choice, diversity, opportunity, flexibility, tolerance. These are the ideals of U. S. education, and the true difference between Korean and American undergraduate education.

## II. International American Students

Not everything works well in the American undergraduate education system. One area that works badly on the margins of the large American educational machine is in dealing with overseas American students.

I attended a U.S. undergraduate college, all right, but I did it from overseas. I had been in Korea from 8th grade through 12th grade, and when I returned to the U.S., it was real culture shock for me. I had not had the same experiences as my classmates. Even my case was mild compared to that of my mother, who had been in Korea for 12 years when she returned to the West, in her case to an English girls boarding school, in 1933. Just as my case was easier than that of my mother, so my children's case was easier than mine, but there are still differences between our experience and that of American students who attended high school in the U.S. My family and I are expatriates. Sometimes we are called "Third Culture Kids," who do not feel at home in either culture and create a third culture of our own, which we carry with us. We tend to move a lot, to form quick but shallow relationships, to be wary of commitment.

When my children went to the U.S., one piece of advice I gave them was to avoid talking about Korea. Nobody cares after the first few sentences. And if you begin every sentence with "In Korea, we...", then soon you will have no audience.

My point about American colleges is that they really do not know about us. American universities are well organized to deal with American students and with foreign students, but not with American students from overseas. This is odd, since there are over one

million Americans living overseas. My children's first letter to colleges explained that they were American citizens, and would be applying for financial aid. Three out of four colleges replied with a letter from the international student office saying there was no financial aid for foreign students, and asking for a TOEFL score. My children did not take the TOEFL; they proctored it. Usually letters from those colleges were just thrown away, as my children would not consider them.

My point is that the American colleges make a big business out of receiving American and international students. But they are in fact no better than Korean universities, which I have called conservative and inflexible, when it comes to dealing with students outside their limited categories. These students represent truly international Americans. American universities do not know what to do with them.

### III. American Students to Koea

Some of the experiences of American undergraduates when they come to Korea also reflect American educational values. The Division of International Education at Yonsei University has 258 international students this fall semester. Of them, 95% are undergraduates and 90% are from the U.S. Thus these students represent American undergraduate education in Korea. In fact, they are not typical undergraduates; they are the best, the ones who chose to have an international experience as part of their undergraduate education, the ones who care about Korea, and who thus come to this distant land. Their values are available for study on the Yonsei University campus in a pure form.

Korean universities are as unable to deal with them as American universities are unable to deal with the international American students. Yonsei has a program for them taught in English, and other universities are now beginning to offer programs for such students, but there are many problems.

One problem I see as an administrator of such a program is how to balance cultural differences and student demands. How much do we listen to our students' complaints as valid, and how much do we just say is part of the Korean experience to be appreciated.

For instance, a major difference is in teaching styles. I receive regular complaints, including some this month. One complaint is that the Korean language course, or the Korean language itself, is just too difficult. Students are unwilling to risk getting a C or D

or F on their transcripts, and they drop out of the course, complaining loudly. Another complaint is that the professors are unwilling to be asked about the grades they give. American colleges univresally have procedures, unheard of here, for a student to challenge a grade and have it reviewed by a committee of other faculty members. Should we set up such procedures?

Another complaint is about classroom styles, in which professors use only the lecture method, without wlecoming or even allowing questions or discussion. Some professors, even in the highly Americanized program of Yonsei's International Division, do not like students to ask questions or disagree with the professor's opinions. They prefer to lecture. I have to tell the students that the lecture-only teaching style is part of the Korean experience, that the students are learning about Korea not only in Korea but in the Korean way.

That is my answer to the students. But the question for this paper is different, as the paper is addressed to college professors. Are you sure you want your students to be internationalized? Are you sure you want them to be like my Yonsei international students? Despite the government's widespread emphasis on globalization, are you sure you want to bring American college values to Korean students?

In addition, of the international undergraduates in the Yonsei program, 75% are Korean-American. We are a roots program, a heritage program. These undergraduates lock Korean but they act American. They represent what American cultural values of education may look like if transplanted to a Korean college-age person. These values may be valuable in theory, but the experience at Yonsei suggests that Korean society is not prepared for these aspects of Korean education.

For instance, Korean-American students are widely criticized if they speak English in public, such as on the bus or subway. When I was in high school, I spoke (bad) French with my classmates in public, to practice. But my Korean-American students have been beaten and harassed for speaking English. Typically, the first experience of Korea for a Korean-American student is to be scolded by the taxi driver on the way into Seoul from the airport for not speaking Korean perfectly. Is this globalization?

Of course, I know the basis of the Korean attitude toward Korean-American students. Koreans believe in heredity above all. (Americans believe in environment above all.) Thus, for Koreans, the Korean-American students are still Korean, no matter if they were born in California and have U.S. citizenship. As Koreans, they should act in a Korean way, and

when they do not, if they act American Koreans judge them severely. Thus, in a survey of attitudes about Korea, taken among Korean-American students at Yonsei in 1992, 67% of the students said that Koreans were "unkind."

Granted, many Korean-American undergraduates face serious questions about their own identity, about whether they are Korean or American or something hyphenated. But my point for this paper is that the Ministry of Education is suggesting the need among Korean undergraduates for exactly some of the values exhibited by the Korean-American undergraduates at Yonsei. If these Korean-Americans receive such critical treatment from Korean society, is Korean society truly ready to have such values in Korean students? These students represent American cultural values of education in Korea. Korean universities don't know what to do with them.

#### IV. Korean Students to America

The counterpart of the American undergraduate students coming to Korea are the Korean undergraduate students going to America. As I said earlier, the students going to America used to be graduate students. But now more and more Koreans are attending American universities as undergraduates.

What kind of undergraduates are these? Everyone I talked to has agreed that the first choice of a college for a Korean is a college in Korea. Thus, the Korean undergraduates in American universities are those who were not able to get into a sufficiently prestigious university in Korea. At least, that is the public perception in Korea, and the perception among most of those students themselves.

But these students have other characteristics besides being academically weak. These students do not get into college in Korea, but the family has enough money so the student can leave for America quickly and get into some language program or university. That is, weak students from wealthy families. The technical term for such students is RSB: rich spoiled brats.

I get many questions and requests for help from American international student advisors. They call me wanting to know how to deal with their undergraduate Korean students. These students will not follow advice, they refuse to study, they hang out with other Koreans and learn no English. They have far too much money. Of course, this does not apply to all Korean undergraduates in America, but the ones it does apply to are very

conspicuous. It is a problem that American universities never saw among Korean graduate students.

The problems are in two areas. First is rules. Some of these rich students have never known a real rule. They hear about rules, but they know that rules do not apply to them. They have never found a rule that their father's money and their father's influence could not solve. Plus, these are students who are not highly motivated in the first place, or they would be in Seoul National University or Yonsei. But they do know how to "work the system," how to find the loopholes and exceptions and weaknesses of any set of rules. Americans are quite naive about rules, because mostly our systems work for us; we can approach them in a straightforward fashion. But Koreans learn how to get around the system like they learn how to breathe, because their educational system has always worked against the individual. The individual, to succeed, always must find the exceptions, the personal contacts, the loopholes. Koreans are experts, and these students are particularly expert.

The second problem of these students is their lack of discipline. Americans often think that the Korean family lacks discipline, that the children (particularly when young) are badly behaved. Koreans expect that discipline will be applied by the school. Americans expect discipline to come from the family; it is not the responsibility of the schools to do more than teach. Universities assume that students are responsible for themselves, and would normally flunk out students who do not perform up to minimum standards. But American universities are reluctant to expel students who are paying full fees. And America never had non-motivated Korean students before.

My point is that just as Korean universities do not know what to do with the Korean-American students, and American universities do not know what to do with international American students, so American universities also do not know what to do with the "RSB's," with that conspicuous minority of Korean international undergraduates. If the Korean undergraduate system becomes more like the American system, such as having an open college entrance system, Korean society will also need to figure out what to do with such students. It will be even harder for Korean universities than for American universities. Their father's influence and money are hard enough to resist in America, but more powerful, almost impossible to resist, in Korea. These students represent a challenge to the American system that supposedly welcomes challenges. Neither American nor Korean universities know what to do with them.

## V. Korean Undergraduates (Back) in Korea

In my final section I want to return to Korea. American undergraduate education is reported on in detail by various other researchers. I have shown some of the limitations of the American educational system in dealing with certain groups, and the ambiguities of Korea in dealing with international groups too.

I have three conclusions.

First, a question. Is Korean society, or Korean undergraduate education, sure it really wants to bring into Korea such values as individualism, creativity, and critical thinking? The Ministry of Education says that such values are desired, but are they truly desired? My suspicion is that they are not. It appears to me that there is no real commitment in Korean society to change, to diversity, to multiculturalism, or to criticism by undergraduates. Korea in fact has always emphasized purity of culture, not diversity. In the past, maintaining the purity of Korean culture had survival value, and a strong nationalism was a benefit in the face of a threatening world. Maintaining purity may no longer be beneficial in a changed international atmosphere. But culture cannot be changed as easily as circumstances.

Koreans want the results of creativity and critical thinking, i.e. world success, but they may not want actual creativity and critical thinking in their own youth. Professors may not want to be challenged and criticized in their own classrooms, by their own students, as sometimes happens in American undergraduate education. Change is coming to Korea, but it may not be welcomed.

My second conclusion is that if Korea does wish to reap the benefits of globalization, Koreans need to change their attitude toward the survivors of American undergraduate education. Such graduates are often looked down on as being second-rate, marginal. They are sometimes resented. But a better response would be to see these students not as representing a "loss of Koreanness" but a "gain of globalization."

Going to another country in high school, before identity is fully formed, may be too early. Certainly the experience of Korea in the last forty years is that going for graduate school is too late. Graduate school forms well-trained people, but they cannot at that stage gain the globalization, creativity, or critical thinking that are now needed in Korea. The time to go is in the undergraduate years.

Yonsei University has gained experience in this area, by sending 200 exchange students to overseas universities each year, largely in the U.S. These students come back changed, but still Korean. They are still Yonsei students, but broadened, capable, open, flexible, international. They learn a great deal from American undergraduate education.

If a year abroad is good, then the Koreans who have undergone four years of American undergraduate education are an even more valuable resource. They are the ones who will be the international manpower to teach Korea about the rest of the world and to help Korea truly.

This leads naturally to my third conclusion. "Globalization" is a very poor word for what is desired, particularly in Korean, because it implies a fundamental change in culture and in the individual. Such a change, in Korea, can only imply a loss of culture, a possible loss of Koreanness, which Koreans, for historical reasons, find particularly threatening.

A better word, used by Richard Lambert of the Council on International Educational Exchange, is "global competence." Global competence is "those special qualities of the mind and behavioral style that distinguish individuals who through formal training or experience abroad are most successful in understanding other cultural contexts and conducting a variety of tasks in foreign settings." (*International Educator*, Fall, 1995, p. 44). Such a definition emphasizes the need for conducting tasks and understanding culture, rather than making fundamental and threatening internal changes

Certainly some kind of learning is needed. The Nov. 2, 1995, issue of the *Far Eastern Economic Review*, speaking of Korean industry's spread into other countries, says, "Running remote factories and selling across borders requires internationalists, and top Korean managers freely admit they have a lot to learn in that area." Such global competence is what Koreans can at best obtain from American undergraduate education.