

The Issue of Proselytizing

The desire of our Lord is that all should be saved and come to the knowledge of truth. God brings international students to universities in our country, and we as Christians have the opportunity of helping the many who do not yet know Jesus. By the working of His Holy Spirit some students believe and trust in Him for eternal life. The opportunity to talk to the international student about Jesus is usually preceded by a loving concern for the international that has many needs (language, friendship, culture, travel and others) when he/she arrives at the university.

Because of these needs and unfamiliarity with the United States, an international can be very vulnerable to being manipulated and taken advantage of by unscrupulous people, some of whom may be religious people. The foreign student advisor's office at the university has among its many responsibilities the welfare of the international student. It seeks to protect the student from those elements that would be harmful to the student's welfare and education.

The National Association of Foreign Student Advisors is governed by the *NAFSA Ethics Program: Ethical Practice in the International Education Exchange*. Section 10 of that manual clarifies for the foreign student advisor issues to consider when working with community organizations such as campus ministries or local congregations. The following section, giving both the general guidelines as well as detailing principles, is taken from the *NAFSA Ethics Program* manual.

10. Members with responsibilities in community organizations working with foreign students and scholars shall:

Make certain that organizations providing programs for foreign students and scholars have clear statements of purpose and responsibility, so that all parties can know what is expected of them.

Accurately portray their services and programs, making clear the identity, the intent, and the nature of the sponsoring organization and of each particular event or service.

Provide appropriate opportunities to observe and to join in mutual inquiry into cultural differences.

Provide adequate orientation for volunteers and participants in community programs so they may understand each other and may interact constructively. The organization should make clear that surreptitious, deceptive or coercive proselytizing is unacceptable.

In the Winter 1995 issue of the *International Educator*, proselytizing was addressed in an article titled, "The New Proselytes" by David Austell, Jr., the Director of International and Student Services at the University of South Florida in Tampa. The following are selected sections from that article.

What is a Proselyte?

The Oxford English Dictionary informs us that "proselyte" derives from the Latin *proselytus* and before to an earlier Greek form which in ancient times was associated with religious conversion, particularly that of a gentile to Judaism. Today, a proselytizer is defined as one who induces an individual to convert to another faith, political party, institution, or cause. Proselytization is still very much with us.

NAFSA has formally addressed the proselytization of internationals on a number of occasions. For example, in its 1981 revision of "Standards and Responsibilities in International Educational Exchange,"

NAFSA recommended that *"there must never be any attempt to proselytize, and any invitation to a foreign student or scholar to an event sponsored by a religious or political group should clearly indicate the nature of the event and its sponsorship."* More recently, NAFSA's Committee on Ethical Practice refined its guidelines on proselytization and published its recommendations in the "Code of Ethics" (1992). The new guidelines state firmly that community organizations working with internationals *"should make clear (to volunteers and participants) that surreptitious, deceptive, or coercive proselytizing is unacceptable"* (emphasis supplied). The wording suggests that it is not the making of converts itself that is troublesome, but rather "surreptitious, deceptive, or coercive" activities. Despite the Code's evenhanded approach, proselytization remains a controversial issue in the international community.

The pall of disfavor surrounding the proselytization of internationals stems from a misconception and a stereotype. The misconception is that all proselytization is coercive and deceptive. Although the ultimate purpose of a campaign of persuasion may be to convert (for example, to convert a person from the Democratic to the Republican stance) the effort need not be unethical. A stereotype adds to this misconception. The stereotypical proselytizer is a creature out of a nightmare: a concealing, conniving, and premeditating zealot who deliberately preys on the vulnerabilities of homesick and culture-shocked internationals and isolates them further from the world of education, culture, family, and friends. The stereotype is more often than not a Christian evangelical of marked conservative sensibilities. It is a potent image. Because of its potency and the lingering misconception that proselytization is always unethical, convert-making is often vilified, whether or not unethical behaviors are present.

However powerful the stereotype might be, however widespread the misconception, they are both nonetheless incomplete mirrors of nature. In reality, proselytization is less stereotypical and more subtle and, when unethical behavior is present, includes pressures to convert to ideologies far more numerous and disparate than the stereotype implies. It is probably not true that in most cases the unethical proselytizer is a shouting evangelist poised in front of the student union. In fact, it is too narrow to view proselytization as operating only in religious contexts, when there are political, social, and even economic contexts in which convert-makers attempt to snare the proselyte as surely as any stereotypical itinerant preacher.

Ethical Ripples

The issue of proselytization in the environment of international education engenders strong emotions and heartfelt and widely varying opinions. Questions stemming from any examination of convert-making are virtually endless, and many of these—essential to clear understanding and civil discussion—have not been clearly answered. A few key examples:

- Is there a threshold at which the free sharing of ideas becomes coercive and inappropriate proselytizing?
- Because proselytization can occur in other than religious environments, are there specific ethical guidelines that should be developed or adapted for use by persons in these other environments (political, social, economic)?
- How can professionals in international education best disseminate information to the community regarding both ethical behavior in convert-making (for example, free sharing of ideas, full disclosure of intentions, voluntary participation in discourse, respect for diversity of opinion and belief), and unethical behavior, (e.g., concealed intentions, coercive behavior, disrespect, and insensitivity toward different opinions and beliefs)?

These and other questions about proselytization must be addressed in an effort to understand clearly the full range of the phenomenon as it applies to internationals. Such ongoing discussions should begin with

its central definition as an activity of convert-making. The concept itself should not be misconceived and vilified but, rather, should be considered as a separate from the unethical behaviors of its evil twin. Proselytization, whether to Republicanism, multiculturalism, or any religious creed, is not in itself an evil. It is not innately synonymous with coercion, deception, or other unethical behaviors. From a constitutional standpoint, it cannot and should not be prohibited, lest we alienate ourselves from our community. What can and must be stemmed is unethical behavior in convert-making. A focus on ethics lends itself to viable and effective action. Prohibition does not.

Finally, it is important to consider that the unethical and stereotypical religious proselytizer is not a total fabrication; such persons do exist in the world, and their improper behavior must be seen for what it is and thwarted. However, the religious stereotype alone should not be focused on as the sum total of proselytization gone wrong. Unethical behavior in convert-making elsewhere will then go unlooked for, unseen, and unchallenged.