

Understanding the IMSO Mission

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The International Military Student Office (IMSO) is clearly at the pointy end of the Security Assistance spear. IMSOs deal directly with International Military Students (IMS) at a professional and personal level for the duration of their stay in the United States. The importance of this responsibility cannot be overlooked.

The way people working in the IMSO conduct business and cope with challenges significantly impacts the impressions of each and every IMS. An IMS' understanding of the people and culture of the United States of America is largely based on what he learns from IMSO programs and operations. A representative of the IMSO is usually the first person they contact when they arrive in the U.S., and the last they see when they leave. The IMSO is in a position to influence every element of an IMS stay in the U.S. Intercultural understanding and professionalism in the IMSO are fundamental to the success of Security Assistance Training.

This responsibility leads many people to believe that the role of the IMSO is diplomatic, that international protocol is top priority. This is a common misconception. While Diplomacy and Protocol have a prominent place in the Security Assistance Training program, they are not at the top of the IMSO priority list. Training and Assistance are the primary emphasis in the International Military Student Office.

Training is #1

When an IMS arrives at an U.S. Army School, his mission is clear - Get the training. While it is true, some IMS get here through political connections or family influence, the vast majority is here to learn. To trivialize that mission by implementing policies that everyone passes the course is a huge mistake.

It benefits the students who are not motivated, and degrades the value of a course diploma. It actually discourages those students who are committed to excel. The very students that the program is designed to impress will leave disappointed.

The IMSO must be willing and able to identify which students are making a sincere effort to overcome the difficulties of training in another language, and which are just trying to get by. A sincere effort must be recognized and rewarded, regardless of test scores. Likewise, apathy to training must be addressed. Students who skip classes or show up late, don't participate in practical exercises or study must be held accountable.

An IMSO can have an enormous impact on the training mission by assisting IMS in the preparation required to understand and appreciate their courses.

Additionally, the IMSO has an obligation to provide training to IMS. They must have an understanding of the culture and values of the United States to be successful. Orientation programs are in effect providing training and assistance.

Assistance can take many forms

Assistance provided IMS by IMSOs starts with orientation programs and continues through graduation. The IMSO is paramount in helping an IMS cope with the distractions of studying in a foreign country and living in a culture that may be vastly different to what they are accustomed.

If Diplomacy were the top priority, IMSOs would just solve problems for IMS. IMSOs go one step further; they help IMS solve their own problems. While this method takes longer in the short term, it builds IMS confidence and helps them identify with the United States. They are more comfortable here.

The scope and volume of the challenges an IMSO faces are far too vast to address here. Be advised that an IMSO must have an open mind and be prepared to deal with anything.

IP is a Valuable Tool

The Informational Program (IP) outlined in AR12-15 is an exceptional vehicle to further both the training and assistance missions. It provides the opportunity to give a basic understanding of the Government,

Values, and Diversity of Life in the United States. America's commitment to individual Human Rights is a cornerstone of the culture.

Understanding the culture not only gives IMS an appreciation for the U.S., it helps them feel confident enough to participate and contribute in class.

Images of the U.S. projected internationally by Hollywood and the international media are prolific. IP is how an IMSO puts those images in perspective.

Keeping Things in Perspective

IMS must be prepared to take responsibility for their own actions. Dealing with them directly from the start; letting them know what is expected of them; helping them face challenges; will eliminate a lot of problems for IMSOs.

By focusing on the individuals; helping them understand our system and culture; emphasizing training; and ensuring that their efforts are rewarded; IMSOs can make the diplomatic role of Security Assistance seem effortless.

International Perceptions of the United States

The world is inundated with images of the United States. International news organizations focus on the U.S.; many have headquarters here. Bad news attracts more viewers and sells more commercials. Images of Monica Lewinski, Columbine High School, and the Oklahoma City bombing create lasting impressions.

Throw in the fantasies perpetuated by Hollywood and international propaganda and many international students, here for the first time, have strong opinions.

While these images are not exclusively negative, they create misconceptions that influence the thoughts and actions of international students.

Though not all students have any or all of these perceptions, it is important to address them.

Some International Perceptions -

- **Americans are Rich** - They drive big cars, live in big houses, fly their own planes. They pay more for a shirt with a name on it. This can create a financial wall. Some students conclude that they are not financially capable of socializing with Americans. It is difficult to identify.

- **Americans are Sexually Promiscuous** - The images are prolific, even at the highest levels. Discretion practiced in other places is a victim of an exuberant entertainment industry and Free Press. The actions of a few reflect on everyone. This can make sexual harassment training seem hypocritical.

- **Americans are Uninformed about the rest of the world** - Sad but true, most Americans know little of the Countries of the World unless they hosted an Olympics or a War involving U.S. troops. America's history of isolationism is reflected in the education system.

- **Americans are Violent / Gun Wielding** - High Profile Violence seems to show up on the Nightly News once a week. School shootings, Handguns, violent extremists, the stories seem endless. The Constitution ensures the right to bear arms. Freedom has a price. If motorcycles were illegal, fewer people would die in motorcycle accidents. The Constitution reflects the will of the people and will not change against their will. Regardless of senseless deaths to guns, America has one of the longest life expectancies in the World.

- **Americans don't like Children** - Retirement communities, birth control, legalized abortions. 60% of American Mothers have a job outside the home. The changes in the size of the American Family are most likely a result of the impact of - the Great Depression, when jobs and food were hard to come by, followed by WWII, when many women felt it was their patriotic duty to have a job outside their home. While WWII was followed by the Baby Boom, successive years have shown an increase in the number of women in the workforce and a decrease in the number of children born to American families.

- **The United States is a Racist Country** - News of racism is very high profile. The history of America's racial challenges is well documented and not that far removed. Though we are proud of our progress, racism continues to be a problem. Racism seems to have shifted from institutions to individuals. Some of

these individuals are trying to create new institutions. These individuals attract a lot of attention from the media.

- Americans don't respect their Elders - Old Folks Homes and Senior Citizens eating dog food are tough images to shake. Social Security is hard to live on. Though many cities have Senior Centers and businesses have Senior Discounts, the feeling is that families should take more responsibility for their elders.

Addressing Negative Judgments

It is human nature when comparing any two cultures to judge one to be better. Reserve judgment and encourage others to do the same. Discussing such issues is far more important than agreeing on which is right and which is wrong. Understanding some else's point of view does imply changing yours.

American Perceptions of International Students

Americans have images of International Students that can create some challenges for the International Military Student Office. Though people in U.S. Military organizations are among the most culturally aware citizens, there remains a tendency to judge individuals by the actions of their country or radical elements within their country.

A religiously conservative terrorist who plants a bomb in the Middle East reflects on a whole society. While a religiously conservative terrorist who burns a series of churches or plants a bomb in an abortion clinic here is on the lunatic fringe.

Americans do not make these judgments of all International Students, nor do they apply all of them to a single individual.

Nonetheless, anti-foreign sentiments can seriously impact the impressions International Students take home with them. It is important to be prepared to deal with them, wherever they may be encountered.

Some Common American Perceptions of the World

- Internationals don't Respect Women- Relationships between men and women are as old as time. Cultures play a large part in defining these roles. It is true that in many places men and women do not have the same rights and privileges. Construing these cultural differences as disrespect is not productive.

This is a very sensitive subject for some students. It is important to inform international students about how men and women react to each other professionally. It is equally important to reserve judgment of international cultures and not impose your values.

- Internationals are Anti-American - The "Yankee Go Home" sentiment has appeared around the world. The United States has a high visibility and our Foreign Policy creates strong reactions.

While we view our international policies as reflections of President John Kennedy's call for "...what together we can do for the freedom of man." they are not always perceived that way.

Most students are proud of their own countries and cultures, and happy to be here to learn. People who are proud of their own countries and cultures are frequently viewed as judgmental and ethnocentric.

In highly competitive cultures, national pride can be misconstrued. When working in a multi-cultural environment, it is important to understand that different is not necessarily greater or lesser.

- The Rest of the World is Impoverished - International Organizations like C.A.R.E. and Save the Children routinely advertise the plights of the world in their search for assistance. Military missions like the one in Somalia expand the image.

While the small percentage of the World's population who is starving to death may appreciate sympathy, it is doubtful that many of the international students we train fall into that category. Sympathy steps on pride and patriotism. Avoid terms like "Third World" that imply judgment.

- International Students aren't Really Here to Learn - This perception can devalue Security Assistance Training on many levels and must be addressed whenever it arises.

While it is true that a very few international students get here through political or family connections, this label can not be applied to the whole program.

Most international students are excited about what they will learn in class, and meeting and working with Americans.

Maintain a Practical Perspective

It is important when working with Americans who are inexperienced or untrained in Security Assistance to keep a positive frame of reference. Don't let anyone make generalizations about international students at any level.

Stereotyping is the root of evil. Stereotypes label people without knowing them. It builds a competitive atmosphere of "Us and Them" that is destructive to the Security Assistance Training Mission.

Multi-Cultural Challenges

Security Assistance Training at the school level creates a multi-cultural environment. While many people have cross-cultural experience, i.e. individuals from one culture working with individuals from another culture, the IMSO is significantly more complex. A single student incident can label an entire group of International students whose only identifying factor is that they are not American.

Common Problems and Solutions

These are some of the recurring challenges of working in a multi-cultural environment.

Instructors complaining about International Students – Very few Instructor training courses address working in a multi-cultural environment. A few have a short block on cross-cultural communications that seem to lump together the rest of the world. By and large instructors get their multi-cultural experience in the classroom. This can be difficult at best.

The result is a lot of generalizations – "They don't speak English"; "They are always late"; "They really don't need this block of instruction."

Direct communication with instructors is critical. Brief them on the dynamics of the class they will teach. Identify which individual students are strong English speakers and which might be difficult to understand. If you tell an instructor that one of your students has a heavy accent that is difficult for many Americans to understand, the instructor will probably take it as a personal challenge.

Don't accept generalizations. If an instructor is complaining, ask for specifics - names, dates, places. Ask how the rest of the International Students are doing. Commit to addressing the problem on an individual basis.

Equally important is direct communication with your students. Let them know what is expected of them in the classroom environment. Tell them what they need to know.

International Students that don't get along – Never assume that any two students will not get along. Most cross-cultural conflicts at the schoolhouse develop as a result of personalities. While some students may have been brought up in adversarial environment, they usually will not fight their wars here.

When international students do clash, either personally or patriotically, try to find common ground. Don't take sides, often the best you can do is to talk them into agreeing to disagree and just stay away from each other.

International Free Pass Policies - Some instructors and faculty members don't have the time necessary to retrain and retest. They generate policies that pass all international students. This can be extremely detrimental to the program and the moral of students who work hard to learn. Don't let someone's opinion of "diplomacy" interfere with the training mission. Encourage the brightest students, aid those in distress, and be willing to let go those that won't make an effort.

Personal Problems - Tardiness, alcohol, cheating, the list is endless. The range and scope of personal problems is far too broad to address here on an individual basis. It is important to be prepared. Let them know who to contact when they have a problem and how you can help them.

Briefing international students on the rules is fundamental. Tell them how you deal with these problems, what security measures are in place and follow through when a problem occurs.

If you tell them the dangers and consequences of drinking and driving, then you are not responsible for what happens after they are arrested. You can not protect them from themselves.

Make sure they understand that they are responsible for their own actions, and you have a job you have to do.

In all cases it is imperative to keep the Desk Officer at SATFA informed of problems as they occur.

Tips for Working with International Students

1. Do Not Generalize - People are like snowflakes, no two are the same. Cultural, Ethnic, or Religious stereotyping leads to trouble. People may have similar backgrounds, religions, or cultures, but, their life experiences are different than anyone else in the world.

2. Do Not Fear the Dreaded International Incident - It is an International Student's responsibility to adjust to training in the U.S. It is not the School's responsibility to adjust to every culture in the World. While compassion and understanding are valuable assets in dealing with people everywhere, it is not necessary to give diplomacy priority over training.

3. Tolerance is Not the Answer - Many people working cross-culturally believe that tolerance is the key. Consider what a humiliating experience it is to be tolerated. It implies that the person being tolerated is lesser. Save toleration for waiters who mess up your order, or people who cut you off in traffic. Never tolerate someone who you expect to build an effective relationship with.

4. Accept Cultural Differences as a Way of Life - Don't try to impose your culture on others or implement another culture here. It is much more effective to accept differences yourself and help students make the adjustments necessary to be successful in their training here.

5. Don't Make Excuses for your Students - Making excuses for your students behavior is like asking someone else to tolerate them. Take responsibility for letting your students know what you expect of them. Encourage others to treat them like anyone else. Remind your students of cultural details they may overlook.

6. Take Pride in the United States of America - Don't make excuses for your country. Be proud of being an American. No system is perfect, accept the imperfections in our system. Prepare to defend the Constitution and the fact that it represents the will of the people.

7. Be Direct when providing Information - Tell them what they need to know, what action you expect them to take. Tell them what action you intend to take and follow through.

8. Honesty is the best Policy, but Tact makes it easier to Take - The truth can be brutal. Regardless of your knowledge or experience, try to convince your students that you will make a genuine effort for them. "I'll try" is better than "I can't", even if you fail, at least you tried. "I'll check on it" is better than "No" even if you are sure "No" will be the answer. When the outcome will be less than the student wants or expects, it is better to be initially evasive before you draw the hard line.

9. Don't Talk Down - When dealing with foreigners, Americans commonly break up their grammar; delete conjunctions from their speech; and speak loudly. Talking down to International Students is easily recognized, even with students of limited English skills. If you have problems, try simplifying by rewording and using shorter sentences.

10. Clarify Misunderstandings - Don't just smile and nod. If you don't understand what someone says, ask them to repeat. Try again, and again. If someone smiles and nods at you, find another way to make the point. Ask a question to test their understanding. Establish yourself as someone willing to invest the time necessary to communicate.