

# **Changing exchange: The Whys and Hows of Connecting to Norwegian America**

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Let me start by thanking the organizers for inviting me to speak at this event. It's a particular privilege to be here in my homestate of Minnesota, and to come here from my adopted home in Tromsø, Norway. The opportunity to work for closer ties between these two places that mean so much to me, gives me great pleasure.

Since we are celebrating connections between Minnesota and Norway in particular at this event, I'd like to point out one additional fact about the Norwegian Centre of Excellence program that several speakers have mentioned so far. The Research Council of Norway created 13 such centers in 2003. Two of those were headed by Americans: The Center for the Study of Civil War, which is headed by Scott Gates, and the Center for Advanced Study in Theoretical Linguistics, which I headed until becoming VP in January this year.

Both Scott and I come from the state of Minnesota. Minnesota, therefore, is exceptionally well represented in what the Research Council of Norway describes as its flagship program for pushing Norwegian researchers into the upper echelons of the international research community.

About 10% of the student body at the University of Tromsø are international students. The Board of Directors at UiT has instructed our Rektor, Dr. Jarle Aarbakke, to increase that number. By the end of our 4-year period in office, our Board expects that 15% of our student body is composed of international students.

We are initiating several actions directed towards this goal. One of the most important is to assertively develop our relationship with Norwegian America. We

believe that the University of Tromsø has several unique offerings to direct at students in this region, just as we believe that those students bring important and unique perspectives to us.

We've heard a lot today about relations between Norway and the Midwest. But in fact, Norwegian America is not as present in the minds of Norwegians in our sector as it should be. I am convinced that there remains tremendous untapped potential in the Midwest for Norwegian institutions, and this is the context in which I cast my comments today.

My focus will be on *exchange* at a broad level, although I will take my examples primarily from thoughts about the exchange of pre-Ph.D. students, i.e. those working towards a bachelor's or master's degree. I am concerned both with student mobility and institutional agreements.

Discussions about exchange quickly become discussions guided by the question word *how*. How can we get more of our students to go abroad? How can we get more students to come to us? How can we get more of a particular kind of student to come to us?

But asking *how* is not the right way to start. *How* is a much easier question to answer when we share a vision of what we are trying to do. And *how* does not bring us to a vision.

We should start our discussion about exchange by asking *why*. Why do we want international students at our colleges and universities? Why do we want students from North America to study in Norway? Why do we want students from Norway to study in North America?

Let's think for a moment about those questions. Why do we want these things? What are the goals for increased exchange? There are many answers we surely share when asking ourselves these questions.

We want certain kinds of experiences for our students, both at home and abroad. We want the college or university experience to include social encounters with peers from other parts of the world. And we believe that the classroom experience is richer when students with a variety of backgrounds are present.

We believe that time abroad, spent at least surviving, but perhaps flourishing in a foreign setting makes a significant contribution to the social and intellectual development of our students.

We see the value of long-term relationships across cultures and we know that students are at just the right age to develop such relationships.

We also believe that our institutions can benefit as institutions by including international students and faculty members in our communities, not least of all by reflecting on the views that those community members offer us regarding our own activities and structures.

When we have asked ourselves *why* we are doing this, it sharpens our vision and gives us purpose. As that happens, we start thinking about who we can target, about the kind of student we want to attract.

In this context, there is one phrase I hear over and over again -- a phrase which I've heard today as well. I often hear people say that we must focus our efforts to attract *the best and the brightest*. And when I hear that phrase, I find that it's often uttered in a way which suggests that this is some kind of absolute standard, with a clear and fundamentally true definition.

But *the best and the brightest* is a term we should understand in a context. Be assured that the University of Tromsø is assertively pursuing not just any candidate student, but *the best* candidate students. But what does this mean? What does it mean for us to go after the best? What does it mean to be the best?

The best students are those students who are most likely to help us realize the goals we identify when we ask *why*. The best students are those who will come to us and put *our* answers to *why* into action.

Given the goals we identified, *the best* for us means students who want to interact with Norwegians. It means students who want to build long-term relationships in an exotic Arctic city that is the Polar Research Capital of the world. It means students who are likely to participate in their education in ways that fundamentally impact the discourse of the classroom.

What kind of student is it, then, who wants to come to Norway, who wants to get to know Norwegians, who wants to build long-term relationships with Norway? There are at least two important answers to these questions.

We can recruit students who have a particular interest in some area that is a *niche of excellence* or a *niche of opportunity* for us. There are several such areas. We are excellent in studies related to the Arctic and to the marine environment. We are excellent in several areas related to oil and natural gas. The University of Tromsø is geographically located in the midst of a region settled by Europe's only indigenous people, the Saami people, and we have an excellent program in Indigenous Studies. Tromsø hosts Norway's Centre for Peace Studies, which gives a unique offering to students.

We are also excellent in some areas that are not a result of our natural situation or advantages. For example, we have Centers of Excellence in both Computational Chemistry and Theoretical Linguistics.

But there is another important answer when we ask what kind of student wants to come help us realize our goals for internationalization. There are students who have a strong interest in Norway for other kinds of reasons. Maybe they love Black Metal music, maybe they love extreme sports in a stunning setting, maybe they have personal connections in their families that lead them to feel a connection with us.

These comments focus on what it means to attract *the best*. Once we understand that this term can only be understood and can only be assigned meaning in some particular context, then we can start thinking about *how* to attract students. This is the area in which I think Minnesota and the Midwest represent significant unrealized potential in the North America - Norway axis.

I'll offer some answers to *how* for two target groups: Degree-seeking students and exchange students. To focus our discussion, let's think about students pursuing a bachelor's degree.

To answer the question as to *how* Norwegian institutions can attract young people from the United States who are going to take a complete bachelor's degree at a Norwegian institution, we have to understand how Americans select colleges. Let me highlight a few aspects of that process.

Many college-bound Americans have an early awareness of an expectation to go to college. They often have a relationship with the institutions where their parents studied. They notice alumni magazines frequently arriving at their homes. They go to a homecoming celebration or perhaps a reunion celebration. They meet their parents' college friends. All of these things conspire to give people early in their lives an understanding the college is something special and that attending college is a privilege.

Colleges and universities have elaborate recruitment programs. They start sending out their materials to students at the beginning of their time in high school, i.e. when they are 14-15 years old, 3-4 years before they will begin their time at a college or university.

There is a great American ritual that takes place in families who have a child about to start his or her final year of high school. Those families pack up their cars and travel around to different campuses, visiting those institutions that have most successfully presented themselves through their literature and other contacts in the 2-3 years leading up to this summer sojourn. Families who are on such trips are warmly received at every institution they visit during July or early August. They are given red-carpet tours and the hosts work to start distinguishing themselves from their competitors, not least of all by building personal relationships.

Students apply for admission during the fall of their senior year of high school and by mid-winter, they know where they have been admitted. Colleges pursue the students they have admitted, having personal contact with them as often as twice a month. This contact focuses first on helping the prospective student make a decision about which school to attend. Once the decision is made, the community building work is amplified with campus visits, course selection assistance, etc.

How can Norway compete with this? I think that it is possible for Norway to enter this competition, but it will involve new activities in many domains. We have to

market ourselves, and we especially have to market our niches. We will, for example, have to have representatives of our system working in person in the U.S. They have to work with high schools, and they have to meet with interested students and their parents.

We can't do this everywhere, so we will have to choose wisely some region of the U.S. to focus on, perhaps a region where people already have some kind of relationship to Norway.

If we try to do this, our representatives will also have to work closely with student recruiting experts and firms who specialize in reaching prospective students.

We will have to find a way to make decisions about admissions much, much earlier than we do today. Instead of waiting until June or July to give an answer about starting in August, we will have to give answers in January or February. Perhaps those decisions can be contingent on achieving certain results in June, but the current situation is a significant barrier.

I have recently learned that Norwegian institutions of higher education will not admit students from the United States until those students have at least one year of college. If this is true, it would seem that Norwegians believe that completing high school in the United States is not sufficient to begin studies at a Norwegian college or university. To anyone who knows both systems, this is patently absurd. If Norwegian institutions are interested in degree-seeking students at the bachelor level, this must change.

If Norwegian institutions want to commit to a strategy of the type I've outlined here, they must be prepared for a sustained engagement of at least five years before one could expect to see significant results.

Is this something that Norway is likely to do? I won't speculate on that myself, but if it is not, I can imagine some competing strategies that could nonetheless allow us to recruit students from the U.S. to Norwegian bachelor's programs.

Because I'm from Minnesota, I know I know several Americans who have taken BA's in Norway. Without exception they are people who have come to Norway first on short-term visits. Are there individuals in Norway on short-term visits or in other parts of our sector who we should be trying to reach?

One untapped market is all the foreigners, including Americans, who come each year to Norwegian *folkehøgskoler*. The foreigners who come to these schools are people who are headed for higher education. We should try to reach them while they're in Norway to tell them about what we have to offer at the university.

We should also try to reach American students who are exchange students in *videregående skoler*. This requires cooperation with ASF, etc.

Another approach is to make sure that every American who actually comes to spend even a little time at a Norwegian college or university hears about the possibilities for coming back to take a master's degree.

The students I've spoken with who come on short-term visits and then stay, give one main reason: Their social network: They made friends, they found a network, they liked living abroad.

We need to make sure that every student who comes to us on short-term visits interacts with other students, not just with those on the same program. We need good mentor programs, including programs for short-term visitors.

We need to make sure that every short-term visitor learns about the long-term possibilities we have.

We should continue to create opportunities for short-term visits, not only because they can be positive per se, but also because we can recruit degree students from them.

Who comes to Norway on short-term visits? Who can help us fulfill our vision -- our answers to *why* -- even on such short visits? We can of course market again to our academic niche and I trust that we will do that.

But there's another potential market that I think is massively underappreciated in Norway. In March of this year, I was invited to address a conference at the Norwegian Centre for International Cooperation in Higher Education.

At that conference, a journalist from the Bergen newspaper made a presentation in which he concluded that Norway is completely devoid of an international reputation. He claimed that in the international arena, Norway "is a country which almost doesn't exist." Now, as a person who grew up in Minnesota, I find that claim to be bizarre.

The Norwegian-American population is important for our attempts to get short-term and long-term BA students, and to get MA students. Norwegian American students can and should be part of our conception of *the best*. They are in a unique position to help us achieve the goals we have in getting more U.S. exchange students to Norway. They want to interact with Norwegians and they want to build long-term relationships. We should be marketing aggressively in Norwegian America, and we should be pushing our efforts to cooperate with institutions. This means a focus both on large schools in the Midwest (U of M and UW) and the small colleges.

Would a focus on the little Norwegian American colleges compromise our wish to attract *the brightest*? It's easy to let our limited attention be focused on the great research institutions in the United States, institutions like Harvard, MIT, Stanford, UC-Berkeley, the University of Minnesota, the University of Wisconsin, the University of Chicago and many more. But it is important to remember that the great research institutions are not necessarily great undergraduate institutions.

Undergraduates at these institutions have relatively limited contact with professors, just to mention one key difference.

A recent survey of American Nobel Prize winners shows about 25% of them having taken their undergraduate degrees at small liberal arts colleges, giving those colleges a disproportionate level of representation among Nobel Prize winners. My own alma mater, Augsburg College, a small school with about 1200 fulltime traditional students, is the undergraduate institution of Nobel Prize winner Peter Agre.

Or, to take another example of excellence from Augsburg, Dr. Tove Dahl of the University of Tromsø, took a B.A. in English at Augsburg and went on to take a Ph.D. in Educational Psychology at the University of Texas, Austin. Her dissertation was selected by the American Council of Teachers of Foreign Languages for its nationally prestigious Emma M. Birkmeier award, which honors the single best dissertation in the United States each year in those fields.

Students from small liberal arts colleges are getting into the top graduate schools in the same numbers -- which of course represents a massively higher rate -- than students who take their Bachelor degrees at those same top graduate institutions.

Little Norwegian American colleges clearly have *the best*, when we think of that term in the way I suggested. Those students will help us meet our goals for having U.S. students in the first place. And I don't think they come up so short when we ask about *the brightest* either.

Let me summarize my proposals.

I propose that we acknowledge the unrealized market potential of Norwegian America, and that we work as closely as we can with Norwegian American institutions to attract more exchange students from those institutions.

Students on short-term programs should also be viewed as students who can be recruited to return either for a semester of the bachelor studies or as master's students. To facilitate this, we should work to integrate such students as much as possible, giving them the opportunity for building their social network in Norway.

I am convinced that we could easily have many more self-financed master's students if we work smarter to assertively market this option to bachelor's students who visit us for a few weeks, or for a semester, or for a year.

If we are interested in degree-seeking students from the U.S., this is going to require a fundamentally different type of engagement. It will also be necessary to work with NOKUT to change their admissions requirements for students from the U.S. If we can work to change this and to clear some of the bureaucratic underbrush from our system, we will have much greater success.

In short, I propose that we think about *the best and the brightest* in a context. We must reflect on the goals we have for internationalizing our campuses and our students. We should ask ourselves *why* we engage in this enterprise. This should lead us to determine who we want to attract as potential students -- which students are the best *in the context of our vision*. When we do that, we can take significant steps forward in internationalizing our campuses.