

The New York Times

College and Company Link Up to Lure Foreigners

By [TAMAR LEWIN](#)

Published: August 7, 2008

BOSTON – Like a lot of other universities, Northeastern has [Barnes & Noble](#) running its bookstore, and Pizza Hut, Wendy's, [Starbucks](#) and Taco Bell selling food in the student center.

But Northeastern has taken outsourcing one giant step further.

In an unusual partnership that began last fall, the university is using Kaplan Inc., a for-profit education company, to find students for – and help run – an academic program for international students to spend a year on campus, improving their English and acclimating to American higher education, before starting one of Northeastern's degree programs.

Although Northeastern is the first American university with such a partnership, the model, now common in Britain, is gaining interest in the United States. Some critics worry that if such partnerships catch on widely, the quest for lucrative international students could undermine academic standards, if the profit motive leads programs to admit unqualified students or use low-paid, poorly trained instructors.

"In a way, these programs bringing international students in for an introductory year are like what we would do with kids from the inner city, but nobody's doing that for profit," said Philip G. Altbach, an international education expert at [Boston College](#). "I do wonder what happens to academic values in all of these market-driven efforts."

In recent years, international students, generally full-paying, have become big business at American universities and around the world. Kaplan, a subsidiary of [The Washington Post Company](#), is known in the United States mostly for its test-preparation business. But the company has huge international-education operations, including teaching English as a second language, with a worldwide network of agents to tap into this market.

The president of Northeastern, Joseph E. Auon, has committed to making the university an international institution. University officials say their program with Kaplan, known as Global Pathways, lets them make sure international

students are adequately prepared before they start degree programs, which can be difficult to ascertain from a foreign transcript.

Patrick Plunkett, executive director of international initiatives, said he felt strongly that to ensure academic integrity, Northeastern employees should teach the classes, rather than handing the teaching off to Kaplan, as the company proposed, and as it does at similar programs it runs at British universities.

"The value added here is being engaged with the university, even before you're in a degree program," he said. The university handles teaching, curriculum and admissions. But Kaplan does everything else.

"We're great at the teaching and learning part, but Kaplan has more expertise in the wraparound services," said Christopher E. Hopey, a vice president at Northeastern.

Kaplan markets the program overseas and recruits the students, guided by explicit admissions criteria, Northeastern officials said, based on the education system in the home countries. Kaplan staff members meet students at the airport, help them find places to live – usually with a family at first – connect them with volunteer conversation partners, and organize parties and outings to Boston Celtics games.

Neither Northeastern nor Kaplan would discuss their financial arrangements; students in the program pay about \$18,000 for the extra year of schooling.

Most students this year are from China and Korea. Mr. Plunkett said the university had been pleased with their caliber. Students who successfully complete the program are guaranteed admission to Northeastern degree programs. Most of the students are preparing for master's degree programs in business, engineering or computer science.

Larry Green, the Kaplan executive who helped set up the program before leaving the company this spring, said he began looking into expanding into the United States after the company's program at the University of Sheffield became popular.

"The reality on any major college campus is that the lines between for-profit and not-for-profit are blurring, as these worlds come together, with companies renting mini-refrigerators or running the bookstores," Mr. Green said. "What universities are really good at is the creation and delivery of undergraduate and graduate curriculum. Kaplan's skill is understanding the needs of foreign students and the complexities and differences of higher education systems."

Last month, [Oregon State University](#) announced a joint venture with INTO University Partnerships, a privately held British firm, for a program to start in fall 2009. INTO, which also runs similar programs at several British universities, is in discussions with other American universities.

At Oregon State, INTO and the university will split the tuition from the program – probably the university's out-of-state rate, almost \$19,000.

Sabah Randhawa, executive vice president of Oregon State, said the university had, for several years, wanted to double its international student body, but has lacked "the resources to develop the infrastructure to sustain recruiting overseas."

Oregon officials said the program will help diversify the student body, as well as bring in \$15 million to \$25 million dollars a year, while allowing the university to retain academic control. They cited the experience at INTO's first partner, the University of East Anglia in Norwich, England, where they said the program grew to 540 students in two years, with two-thirds continuing into the degree programs.

But at some British universities, instructors fought INTO programs, saying they were worried that the company would be more interested in profit than in teaching. Some Oregon State faculty were also wary.

"In November, they told us they were thinking about this great program that wouldn't cost the university anything and would generate millions of dollars," said Deborah Healey, who until recently directed the university's English Language Institute.

But even though the institute faculty, with their long years of experience, have been promised they will remain university employees, new instructors hired for the program, she said, are likely to be INTO employees, with less college teaching experience.

Mr. Randhawa said that while the university will definitely play a role in hiring instructors for the program, it has not yet been decided whether they will be INTO or university employees.

Northeastern's students learn nuts and bolts of American college life like how to open a bank account, how to write a critical essay and what constitutes plagiarism in the United States. Students get instruction in written and oral English. They take courses like science and math, where they mix with Americans and earn credits to get a head start in their degree programs.

Kaplan also helps with unexpected problems. "After two weeks here, I found my home stay family had bedbugs," said Joanne Shin, a Korean student. "The Kaplan people helped me go to the doctor, and offered me a new home stay."

Karl Reynolds, an English instructor, said only one student had failed a class and been required to repeat it before moving into a degree program.

Although the first group included mostly students seeking graduate degrees, this fall, Mr. Plunkett said, most of the 150 students will be undergraduates. They will still mostly come from Asia, but with more from Turkey, Nigeria, Saudi Arabia and Latin America. Eventually, Northeastern hopes to expand the program to 400 students.

In one English class this summer, where students were doing presentations on mass media, Weijun Zhan, a lively 21-year-old from China, talked about the "[Jerry Springer](#)" show, showing clips of its trademark brawls. "Wow, it's so fresh to me," Mr. Zhan said. "I never saw something like this."

Other students applauded him, congratulating him on choice of topic and enthusiastic presentation. But when the teacher asked for criticism, they had that, too.

Rui Chen fired off a list of nine English usage errors Mr. Zhan had made. "It's aunt, not auntie," she said. "Say, 'the exact' answer, not 'the exactly' answer."

Ms. Chen seemed at ease in English.

"At the beginning I could barely speak English," said Ms. Chen, 20, who lived with an American family at first but now has moved to an apartment with other students from the program. Her improved language skills are partly attributable to a fortunate pairing; the man who volunteered to be her conversation partner became her boyfriend. "He corrects me all the time," she said.

Many of the students said their main goal in the program was greater fluency in spoken English. "Many Chinese students, we can read and write English, but in daily life it's hard to communicate," Wen Zhou Pan said.

To smooth social contact with others who speak a different language, the students were encouraged to adopt American names. Mr. Pan chose Peter. A "Friends" fan dubbed himself Chandler.

Mr. Green, the Kaplan executive, said the company picked Northeastern for the program's American debut because of its growing reputation, its location in

university-rich Boston and, especially, its co-op program, in which students have job placements built into their education.

For foreign students, American work experience was a big draw.

"I knew Northeastern had co-op, and that's important to me, because I don't want to waste my time," Mr. Zhan said. "It sounds like I'm wasting time, to be here for a whole year before being in a degree program. But this is the biggest economy, the most important country in the world. So I want to use my time to learn American thinking."