

In Search of Intercultural Competence

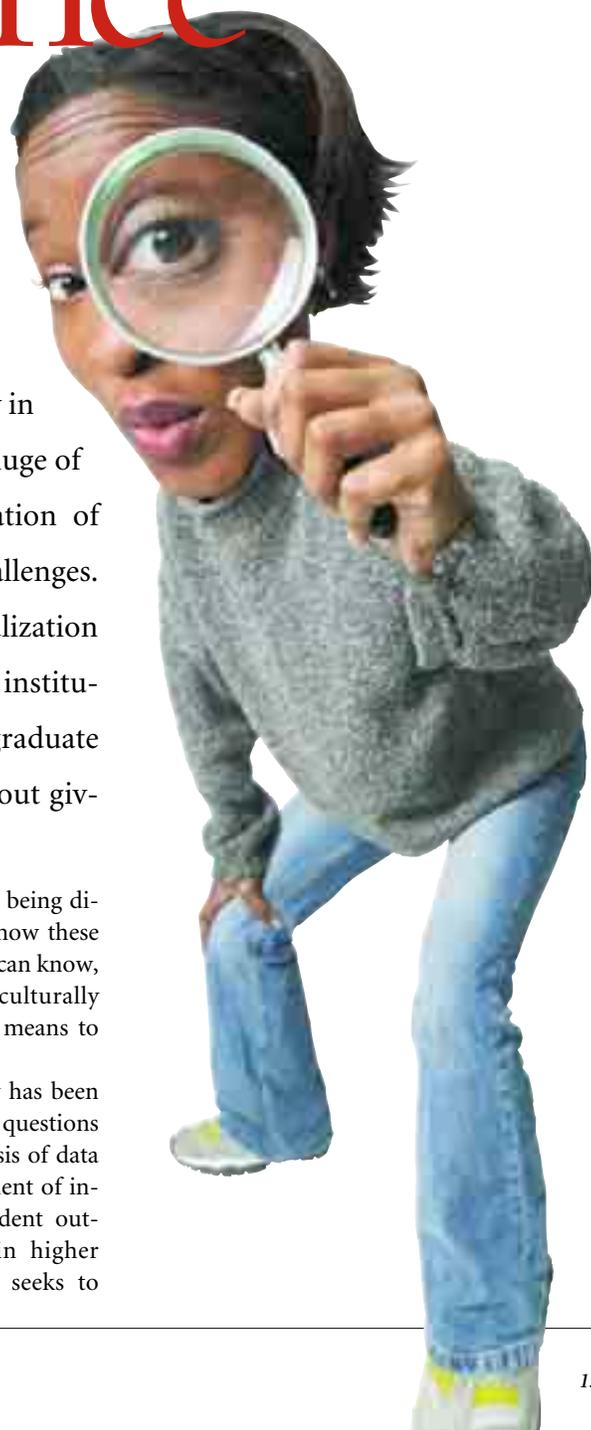
BY DARLA K. DEARDORFF

U.S. INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION face many challenges at the beginning of the twenty-first century including the tasks of remaining intellectually and culturally viable in a rapidly changing world, preparing students to vie competitively in the global marketplace, and staying abreast of the electronic deluge of information and globalized knowledge. The internationalization of higher education has become one possible response to such challenges. Yet the specification of anticipated outcomes of internationalization are often general and vague, with goals stated broadly that the institution will “become internationalized” or that a goal is to graduate “cross-culturally competent students” or “global citizens” without giving further meaning to these phrases.

Few U.S. universities address the development of intercultural competent students as an anticipated outcome of internationalization in which the concept of “intercultural competence” is specifically defined. This lack of specificity in further defining intercultural competence is due presumably to the difficulty of identifying the specific components of this concept. Even fewer institutions have designated methods for documenting or measuring intercultural competence. So, while the purpose of having an internationalized campus

is obvious enough that funds are being directed accordingly, it is unclear how these institutions know, or even if they can know, that they are graduating intercultural competent students and what it means to be intercultural competent.

A new doctoral research study has been undertaken to address these key questions through the collection and analysis of data on the identification and assessment of intercultural competence as a student outcome of internationalization in higher education. This research study seeks to



provide administrators with a more definitive meaning of intercultural competence, as well as with suggestions regarding the effective assessment of students' intercultural competence. (See "New Research" below for more information.) At a minimum, this study will help generate discussion around the complex phenomenon of intercultural competence, as well as discussions on how to assess meaningful outcomes of internationalization.

A Barometer

Institutions of higher education rely heavily on numbers to demonstrate success in internationalization—numbers such as how many of their students study abroad, how many international students study on their campus, how many foreign faculty teach courses, how many courses are included in the internationalized curriculum, and so on. While such numbers are certainly an important element to evaluation, what do they indicate about the meaningful outcomes of internationalization, such as developing interculturally competent graduates who can compete successfully in the global workforce? In answer to this question, a report by the American Council on Education (ACE) stated, "Such measures are silent on student learning and attitudes. While this 'supply-side' approach to internationalization provides a starting point, institutions that are serious about its effect on students should take a closer look at learning goals, course content, pedagogy, campus life, enrollment pattern, and institutional policies and practices to get a more complete picture of their success" (Engberg and Green 2002). There is a need to move beyond numbers (outputs) to meaningful outcomes of internationalization. Given increasing pressure on institutions to evaluate the effectiveness of their internationalization efforts, questions often arise as to what specifically to evaluate in regard to internationalization and more importantly, how to evaluate. And quite



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often, intercultural competence is being looked at as an indicator of internationalization.

There is little agreement, however, as to specifically what constitutes intercultural competence. For example, if intercultural competence comprises knowledge, skills, attitudes, and awareness to enable a person to interact effectively with those from other cultures, what actually comprises intercultural knowledge? Intercultural skills? Intercultural attitudes? Intercultural awareness? While there has been some effort to research and write about this in the field, there has been no real agreement on the specifics. Furthermore, how can intercultural competence be assessed? How can this demonstrate effective implementation of internationalization strategies? As Terenzini and Upcraft (1996) observed, "...while assessing the purported outcomes of our efforts with students is probably the most important assessment we do, it is seldom done, rarely done well, and when it is done, the results are seldom used effectively." Yet, there is a correct way to do it, if a definition is clear and accepted: "...Competence can be measured. But its measurement depends first on its definition..." (Klemp 1979).

Defining the Term

What exactly is intercultural competence? This question has been debated by experts for decades and a myriad of terminology has been used including global competence, global citizenship, cross-cultural competence, international competence, intercultural effectiveness, intercultural sensitivity, to name a few. (*Global competence, as explained on p.6–12 by William Hunter, indicates that intercultural competence is a significant part of global competence.*) Yet, how do institutions of higher education define intercultural competence?

Previous Research

Definitions have cited some of the same general components of intercultural competence such as empathy, flexibility, cross-cultural awareness, and managing stress, while some definitions of intercultural competence specifically note other elements such as technical skills, foreign language proficiency, and situational factors. Other scholars have written that intercultural competence does not comprise individual traits but is rather the characteristic of the association between individuals and that no prescriptive set of characteristics guarantees competence in all intercultural situations (Lustig and Koester 2003). Chen and Starosta (1996), in their definition of intercultural competence, stress that cross-culturally competent persons are those who can interact effectively and appropriately with people who have multilevel cultural identities. When presented with various definitions of intercultural competence, administrators who participated in this study selected the following summarized definition as the one that is most applicable to their institution's internationalization strategies: Knowledge of others; knowledge of self; skills to interpret and relate; skills to discover and/or to interact; valuing others' values, beliefs, and behaviors; and relativizing one's self. Linguistic competence

also plays a key role. (Byram 1997). Nearly all definitions of intercultural competence include more than knowledge of other cultures, since knowledge alone is not enough to constitute intercultural competence. Intercultural competence also involves the development of one's skills and attitudes in successfully interacting with persons of diverse backgrounds.

The following are some additional questions and issues that scholars have wrestled during the search for a definition. Should intercultural competence be defined more generally or more specifically? Should intercultural competence be measured holistically or in separate components? What role does language play in intercultural competence? Should intercultural competence be measured in degrees and if so, what are the implications for those deemed intercultural incompetent? Is intercultural competence context-specific or is it possible to identify comprehensive elements that are applicable to many different contexts? How does intercultural competence fit with global competence?

New Research

For purposes of the new doctoral study currently underway, the study focuses on assessment and how administrators can become better evaluators of this one specific student outcome of internationalization. This study relies on a combination of research methodologies in analyzing the concept of intercultural competence as a student outcome of internationalization efforts. Specifically, there were two phases of data collection included in the research design: The first phase involved taking a "snap shot" of how institutions of higher education that are committed to internationalization view the identification and assessment of intercultural competence. The second phase of the research design involved content experts in addressing the question of what constitutes intercultural competence and how this can be assessed.

In the first phase of the study, a questionnaire was sent to key administrators at 24 institutions of higher education that have been identified by NAFSA and ACE as institutions that are strongly committed to internationalization. This research phase served as a needs assessment to determine administrators' thoughts on intercultural

competence and ways to measure such competence. The second phase of this research used a research technique known as a Delphi study, in which 23 top experts in the intercultural field engaged in an interactive process over a three-month period with the goal of achieving consensus on what constitutes intercultural competence and the best methods to measure this competence. The last step in the data collection involved ascertaining whether administrators and intercultural experts agreed on the aspects of intercultural competence that emerged from the national Delphi study. As with any study, there were certain limitations including the initial underlying assumptions that intercultural competence can be defined and assessed. This study is in progress at the time of this writing and the findings will be reported at a later date. Preliminary results indicate that while there are certainly areas of agreement between administrators and experts, there are also some areas where the two groups may not agree with each other. This will be further explored once the study is completed. One result of this study will be a model of intercultural competence that can hopefully be used by higher education administrators in their internationalization efforts.

What's at Stake?

In 2000, ACE published a preliminary report on the state of international education in the United States entitled "Internationalization of U.S. Higher Education." After examining both published and unpublished studies on internationalization, ACE found that there were many gaps in the known data on internationalization. Furthermore, the ACE report concluded that there has been little improvement in the internationalization arena of higher education in the United States since ACE's assessment in this same area in 1986–87, thus resulting in serious concern for the state of international education in the United States (Hayward 2000). The ACE report stated that "in spite of an apparent growing national interest in international education, relatively few undergraduates gain international or intercultural competence in college." Moreover, the report cautioned that "if we fail to become effective global citizens" with the ability to "move seamlessly between different nations, cultures, and languages," the United States

may find itself falling behind the other major players in the world (Hayward 2000). Likewise, the 2000 Policy Statement of the International Association of Universities, presented at a UNESCO World Conference in Higher Education, recommended that "all internationalization programs...promote intercultural competence and a culture of peace among global citizens."

In sum, this study explores further what it means to be intercultural competent, the best ways to measure this, and the issues involved in such assessment—within the context of internationalization efforts. It is hoped that this study will serve as a springboard for further research not only on intercultural competence but also in assessing the specific impact of internationalization strategies on the development of students' intercultural competence in preparing them for the global workforce.

— Darla K. Deardorff is coordinator of the Duke-UNC Rotary Center for International Studies in Peace and Conflict Resolution, one of only seven such centers world-wide, and is chair-elect of COMSEC. She is completing her doctorate in higher education administration this spring through North Carolina State University, and is one of the session presenters of "Guiding the G-Generation: NAFSA's Role in Global Workforce Development" at the NAFSA Annual Conference in Baltimore on May 28.

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