



The Economic Imperative of a Global Education

*White paper from the NAFSA 2018 Worldview
Global Workforce Development Roundtable*

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Students, parents, business and higher education leaders, and policymakers all agree that the United States now needs a workforce that is globally competent and internationally educated. Unfortunately, only ten percent of college graduates have studied abroad (IIE 2017) and less than a third of higher education institutions report a high level of internationalization on campus (ACE 2017). The U.S. economy is inextricably linked to the global economy, offering both opportunities and challenges to U.S. businesses. Without a globally competent workforce those businesses risk being unable to adapt to new markets and new demands.

In April 2018, NAFSA convened a Worldview Global Workforce Development Roundtable discussion on the “Economic Imperative of a Global Education.” Partnering with the Business Council for International Understanding and working with Senator Roger Wicker (R-Miss.) to host the discussion on Capitol Hill, we brought together higher education and business leaders to discuss the connection between international education and global workforce development.

NAFSA believes that international education must be a critical component of a quality education and not just a luxury for certain students at certain institutions. This is why we have been a champion of the democratization of study abroad through the Senator Paul Simon Study Abroad Program Act and an advocate for immigration reform that would create an immigration system that allows international students and scholars from around the world to study in the United States.

This white paper will provide just a few examples, based on the roundtable discussion, of why a global perspective is important for all students, regardless of their institution, field of study, or intended occupation.

Global Supply Chains and Opportunities Half a World Away

Representatives from the fields of technology, agriculture, manufacturing, and education attended the roundtable discussion to talk about how their industries were influenced by international education. Perhaps the most direct connection came from an attendee who works for a global agri-business headquartered in the Midwest who described a day in the life of a commodities trader working to ensure that the demand for commodities in Southeast Asia could be met by suppliers in Australia, South America, or the U.S. Midwest. Their traders need to understand the global dynamics of their field, be able to work with different teams across the world, and have the flexibility to respond quickly to unexpected situations. This company specifically looks for employees who are comfortable working in local communities throughout the United States while also being able to think and act globally.

A representative from the technology sector agreed that a global education was important for the continued success of their field. The supply chain for semiconductors, for

example, is truly global and without a globally educated workforce they would be unable to continue to innovate to keep up with demand from consumers.

These companies are not alone in needing workers who understand the world and are comfortable working across cultures. Some companies are able to foster these skills through in-house training, but more often they are reliant on higher education institutions to provide quality global learning opportunities so that their graduates have these skills before they enter the workforce.

Mid-level Managers’ Multicultural Communications

Noting that only a third of the U.S. workforce will earn a BA or higher and only a third of those will earn an MA degree, one roundtable participant expressed concern that too often the conversation about the future of higher education defaults to first-time, degree seeking students at four-year colleges and universities. When international education is viewed strictly through that lens as well, focusing on area studies majors or year-long language

immersion programs as the default mode of international education, there is a risk of denying global educational opportunities to a large swath of the U.S. public.

Continuing to focus primarily on four-year institutions and graduate programs could lead to a widening of the global divide, with certain workers receiving international education opportunities while other underprivileged students graduate without these global skills. A phlebotomist drawing blood at a hospital in Minneapolis, Minnesota or Phoenix, Arizona must be comfortable working with people from different backgrounds. A general understanding of the Somali immigrant population would be helpful in Minneapolis and some basic Spanish language proficiency is almost certainly a necessity in Phoenix. A truck driver hauling corn sweetener from Iowa to Portland is one piece of a global supply chain, and machinists and welders are affected by global trade policies that influence the price of steel and aluminum. Ensuring that everyone has a global education, does not mean that everyone in the United States should have a degree in international finance or Russian literature. It means that everyone should have an understanding of the global forces that shape his or her life and how to operate effectively in the multicultural environment that is the twenty-first century.

One two-year college in the Midwest has developed an intercultural communications program for mid-level managers in the community. Local business owners observed bottom-line impacts due to communication barriers between the line workers, who were primarily new immigrants, and their managers, who were primarily local residents. They found that simply teaching the new workers English through their ESL program was not enough to break down the communication barriers between the managers and their workers. The managers needed to better understand their own culture and how it related to their employees' cultures and backgrounds.

A mid-level manager at a local packaging or bottling plant may never need to travel outside of the country for her job, but the forces of globalization are such that in order to be successful, she needs to understand the world and how her town, state, and country fit within that world. International educators are providing this type of training to workers in communities around the country. If both two- and four-year U.S. higher education institutions, as well as secondary and vocational schools, integrated this type of training into their curricula, workers would be better equipped to work in multicultural environments from their first day.

Fostering a Global Mindset

A consistent theme within the roundtable discussion was a need for managers and executives to be globally competent. Managers at multinational corporations will need to operate within a multinational environment and need a global mindset to be successful.

One particular multinational corporation uses international education and placements to evaluate and train the managers they have identified for promotion and advancement within the company. A manager from Sweden who is seen as a rising star may be transferred to Atlanta, Georgia for two years and then to Sao Paulo, Brazil. These assignments provide the manager an opportunity to view the global nature of the company while also interacting with and learning from coworkers in three different countries, languages, and cultures. They ensure that all employees are trained on the basic technical skills, from senior management down to the line workers on the shop floors, but they also put an emphasis on the “fundamentals,” interpersonal skills, communication skills, and teamwork. As the pace of change in technology increases, the technical skills workers require will constantly change, but the fundamentals will remain important. The global mindset and the mental agility needed to operate in the fast-paced world will become even more important.

International education provides graduates with the mental agility that multinational companies need. A university president at the roundtable said the responsibility of higher education is to “see around corners” and “think down the road” in order to prepare students for a successful life after graduation. With the changing nature of work, the types of skills students need now are different than in the past and the ability to work across differences is vital. Global learning cannot just be a luxury, but must be integrated into the structure of a quality higher education.

Developing a Global Skillset

The cornerstone of a successful business relationship is trust. But different cultures build trust in different ways. One participant from a prominent global business school described a recent exercise he did with managers from more than a dozen different countries. He asked each person to describe how they build trust with their colleagues. The responses covered a range of trust building activities, including analyzing the performance of each worker, learning more about their personal lives, spending time gossiping over tea, or interacting with them socially after work hours. Though seemingly simplistic, concepts

of trust building highlight the incredible importance of understanding how different cultures interact within business environments. A business partnership may make sense on paper, but if the partners are not able to build a trusting relationship, then a polished slide deck or thorough market analysis will not be enough to succeed.

As another university president from a large public institution pointed out, the United States is the world's hegemony. This provides U.S. workers, students, and graduates definite advantages when competing in the global marketplace, but it can also be a disadvantage. Businesspeople in countries around the world have a much deeper understanding of U.S. history, politics, and culture. They learned English by watching U.S. movies and sitcoms, eating at U.S. fast food restaurants, and may have even been educated in U.S. colleges and universities. This puts them at a decided advantage when negotiating across the table from a businessperson from the United States who may have only a passing understanding of another country's history or language. A quality global learning opportunity helps to level that playing field. It can explain the cultural differences students may encounter in a classroom setting and then provide an experiential learning opportunity that would allow them to put that education into practice. It is this combination of cognitive and experiential learning that makes a quality global learning experience so powerful and develops a global skillset that allows graduates to succeed.

The Promise of a Global Education

If U.S. higher education continues to treat international education as a luxury for certain students at certain colleges and universities, then too many graduates will continue to be left behind. The forces of globalization are bringing people closer together, and graduates with global mindsets and skillsets are needed to ensure that the United States retains its competitive advantage with the rest of the world.

With only 10 percent of U.S. college graduates studying abroad (IIE 2017), a decline in new international student enrollments (IIE 2017), and language learning nearing an all-time low (Looney and Lusin 2018), there is much work to be done to ensure that all students have the global learning opportunities necessary to succeed in the global environment that they will enter after graduation. Policy makers, business leaders, and higher education institutions need to work together to address this challenge.

Congress can act by passing the Senator Paul Simon Study Abroad Program Act to encourage global learning by students of all backgrounds and by advancing immigration policies that attract and retain international students and scholars.

Business leaders can act by strongly articulating the global skills and experiences that they desire and by working with the higher education community to develop programs that provide those skills.

Higher education can act by prioritizing international education on campus and integrating internationalization into their curricula.

NAFSA is committed to advocating for policies that create a more welcoming, globally informed, and globally engaged United States, and we will continue to develop resources that equip international educators on college campuses around the world to better serve their students.

The NAFSA Worldview Roundtable, "The Economic Imperative of a Global Education," was the first in a series of events that NAFSA will host exploring the important role that international education plays in developing a global workforce.

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