

By Christopher Connell

## Princeton's Path-Breaking President Pursues a Global Agenda

An interview with Shirley M. Tilghman,  
president of Princeton University

**P**RESIDENT WOODROW WILSON COINED PRINCETON UNIVERSITY'S MOTTO, "Princeton in the Nation's Service," at the end of the nineteenth century. A decade ago a successor modified the saying to reflect a broader mission for the Ivy League institution: "In the Nation's Service, In the Service of All Nations." Now, as part of an ambitious internationalization plan, Princeton President Shirley M. Tilghman is launching a program to send newly admitted students off to perform a year of service in other countries, even before they set foot on the New Jersey campus.

The initiative, which Princeton hopes to have in place for the high school students admitted in April 2009, would steer as many as 100 students a year—10 percent of the incoming class—into international service projects. Princeton, with its endowment of nearly \$16 billion, plans to provide financial aid to help needy students pay program fees, living expenses, and travel costs. No tuition would be charged. It is one of the ways that Tilghman, a molecular biologist who helped clone the first mammalian gene, is trying to build global awareness "into the DNA of Princeton," as she puts it.

Tilghman and Provost Christopher L. Eisgruber now have a group of faculty, staff, and students working on how to make this bridge year happen. The Canadian-born Tilghman says, "This bridge year initiative lies at the intersection of two high priorities of Princeton. One is to increase the international perspective of all students...both through the direct experiences of those who participate and the insights they share with other students when they arrive on campus. The second priority is to expand Princeton's commitment to the service of all nations by encouraging students to spend time abroad engaged in meaningful service activities to which they can devote their full energies." Some students already have been engineering bridge years on their own; the admissions

office for years has looked with favor on requests from high schoolers to delay enrollment while tackling a worthwhile project. But Tilghman has given this initiative such impetus that it seems certain to attract wider interest and participation.

Tilghman, who first came to the United States as an international student in 1970, and Eisgruber, a legal scholar who majored in physics at Princeton before studying at Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar, put their imprimatur on Princeton's international push last fall when they released a report, *Princeton in the World*, embracing a faculty blueprint for ramping up Princeton's engagement with outside scholars and research. Tilghman, who became Princeton's president in 2001, earlier had established the Princeton Institute for International and Regional Studies (PIIRS) to promote interdisciplinary research. Recently, Princeton named Diana Davies, director of international programs at the University of Iowa since 2000 and a former director of the Languages Across the Curriculum Program at Binghamton University, to the newly created position of associate provost for international initiatives.

Princeton long has attracted scholars from around the world (although Albert Einstein—a familiar figure on campus during the two decades he lived in Princeton—actually was with the Institute for Ad-



Shirley M. Tilghman

vanced Study, a separate institution). With stellar graduate programs in the arts, sciences, engineering, and humanities, but no professional schools of law, medicine, or business, Princeton retains a keen focus on undergraduate education. It is smaller than most of its rivals, with 4,800 undergraduates and 2,300 graduate students. Princeton was the first of the Ivies to stop requiring loans for students on financial aid. It provides financial aid on an equitable basis for all students, domestic or international. International students comprised 11 percent of freshmen and 40 percent of new graduate students last fall.

Citing the “dizzying speed” with which people, products, information, and even pathogens now circulate, *Princeton In the World* decreed that students need to become more comfortable interacting with other cultures, and faculty must “recognize that their potential collaborators and rivals will come from not only familiar institutions in the United States and Europe, but also a host of new, and newly vigorous, universities throughout the world.” Tilghman says the push to internationalize needs to remain faculty-driven, not imposed from Nassau Hall, and there are no plans to build satellite campuses overseas. Princeton will create a new set of faculty positions for visiting “Global Scholars,” and a “Global Initiatives Fund” to help professors add international components to their research and courses. A newly formed Council

on International Teaching and Research that crosses division lines will bring scholars and graduate students from overseas to Princeton for extended stays. And Princeton is in the midst of a \$1.75 billion fund-raising campaign that seeks \$300 million for “national and global citizenship” purposes.

The Toronto-born Tilghman, 61, arrived in the United States in 1970 after serving in the Canadian equivalent of the Peace Corps. Tilghman’s father moved the family around Canada (Ontario to Alberta to Manitoba) while working for the Bank of Nova Scotia. A math prodigy, she’d ask her parents not for bedtime stories but to quiz her on numbers. At Queen’s University in Kingston, Ontario, she knew that she wanted to pursue a career in science. Marriage to a Peace Corps volunteer brought her to Philadelphia, where she earned her Ph.D. in biochemistry at Temple University, then did postdoctoral work at the National Institutes of Health, making important discoveries in the emerging field of molecular biology there and at the Fox Chase Cancer Center before accepting an endowed chair at Princeton in 1986. She became founding director of Princeton’s Lewis-Sigler Institute for Integrative Genomics in 1998. She also raised a daughter and son by herself. Tilghman remains a passionate advocate for women in science and a role model for how to juggle career and family. Tilghman spoke with *International Educator* in her office in historic Nassau Hall, which

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still bears a scar from a Revolutionary War cannonball and where the Continental Congress sat for several months in 1783.

**IE: Princeton University already seems a highly international place. What was missing?**

**TILGHMAN:** This initiative is more about preparing us for the future than correcting mistakes of the past. I've traveled all over the world on behalf of Princeton; there is no place on this planet that doesn't know about Princeton University. We believed it was necessary for us to take a moment to ask not whether we had done well in the past, but how can we be sure that 25 or 50 years from now the president sitting in this office can say what I say today, which is that we are one of the great world universities.

The task force helped us recognize how much we were already doing. The reason why it was perhaps less clear than it should have been is because universities function largely as bottom-up organizations, where things percolate up from the students and the faculty, gain momentum and support, and eventually someone in Nassau Hall recognizes what's going on. To a very large extent, the working group discovered exactly those kinds of things happening all over campus, every place from astrophysics, which has these very important relationships in Chile and Japan, to places you'd expect to find international relationships, such as the Department of German or Slavic Languages. They don't need me sitting in Nassau Hall thinking deep thoughts, trying to conjure up new ideas about how to do this. It's going to happen as long as we are allowing a thousand flowers to bloom.

**IE: A separate report by Dean of the College Nancy Malkiel calls for expanding education abroad opportunities. What was lacking there?**

**TILGHMAN:** That is where we found that we had the greatest deficit to fill. For years, most students had the expectation they would *not* study abroad. They often said that Princeton made it too difficult to study abroad, that independent work in the junior year made it difficult, that if you were in a department with a junior seminar in the fall, you couldn't miss that, and then you couldn't miss the junior paper in the spring or you wouldn't be ready for the senior thesis. We have been reducing the administrative barriers gradually. Departments are trying to (structure) the junior year to allow study abroad. The greatest barrier now is that students don't want to leave this place.

**IE: To play devil's advocate, undergraduates have hundreds of courses to choose from at Princeton. Why risk taking a chance on Seville?**

**TILGHMAN:** The most compelling reason is when studying abroad adds to the quality of their academic program. If you're writing your senior thesis on Renaissance art, a semester in Florence is a very, very good thing. If you're a molecular biology major, it's sort of irrelevant whether you do genetics in Stockholm or in Princeton. But the least compelling reason (to stay here) is, 'I don't want to leave my friends.'

We are not going to compel people to study abroad, but we are going to create opportunities for those for whom it makes a lot of sense. For the rest, we're going to use summers as an opportunity. We don't teach any summer courses here at Princeton, but we just started creating Princeton-credit courses in the summer that you can take outside the United States. We sent a group of students to Hanoi this past summer with an alumnus, Desaix Anderson, Class of '58, a career diplomat who spent a lot of time in Vietnam. They had a unique experience,

studying the history, culture, and languages of Vietnam. [Seminars are being added in summer 2008 in Krakow, Poland, on the film and cultural history of Eastern Europe, and one in Istanbul, Turkey, on Islam and modernity.] We think that these summer seminars are going to be very popular with both the faculty and with students. It's not going to be huge numbers. We're not going to be able to manage huge numbers.

**IE: Will you open these summer seminars up to students from other colleges?**

**TILGHMAN:** No. What we have opened up are some of our summer language programs, such as the Princeton in Beijing program, which is probably the premier Chinese language program in the world. There's stiff competition to get into that. We are expanding those kinds of language opportunities with our own faculty. We have programs also in Ishikawa, Munich, and St. Petersburg.

**IE: You decided against setting up satellite campuses; no bricks and mortar anywhere else. What were the pros and cons of that?**

**TILGHMAN:** Given the breadth of what's happening here, it would be very difficult to choose just one part of the world. At the end of the day, we elected for breadth rather than depth.

Also, there is nothing more valuable to this university than its reputation and name. When someone receives a Princeton degree, I can guarantee the quality of that degree; I can guarantee what happens on this campus. We have never had what I would call a serious negotiation with another university or a government for that matter where I thought there was any chance that we could replicate elsewhere what we do here, and therefore I couldn't call it Princeton. And that's what they wanted. They wanted that brand.

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**IE:** So there will be no satellite Princeton campus in the Middle East.

**TILGHMAN:** No. Obviously I can't make a blanket statement, but if you look at the universities trying to do this, particularly in the Middle East, they are having enormous difficulty attracting faculty. The key to a great university is the quality of its faculty. If you cannot attract Princeton-quality faculty, you will not get a Princeton educational experience.

**IE:** Your plan talks about 20-25 percent of future graduating classes studying abroad, up from 15 percent now. And that's not counting students with well-stamped passports who do internships and travel abroad on their own.

**TILGHMAN:** A lot of students are now using summers to go abroad. That's a wonderful thing, but there are days when I worry that there aren't enough students actually flipping burgers and finding out what it's like to make a living. Nevertheless, I realize that that is probably an ancient way of thinking about how you spend your summers.

**IE:** Have you figured out a way so students from poor families don't miss out on opportunities to study or do research abroad?

**TILGHMAN:** For us, probably the highest priority for this campaign is to ensure that we have enough resources so that no student will make the decision about whether to study abroad or go abroad in the summer based on financial considerations.

**IE:** The theme of your campaign is 'aspire.' Who or what is Princeton aspiring to?

**TILGHMAN:** We aspire to be better. That's different than aspiring to be somebody else. One of the reasons I liked 'aspire' as the theme is that it is both ambitious and yet humble. Implied in 'aspire' is the fact that you're not good enough yet, that you could be better, that there's more to do.

In the international arena, what we really hope to do is create as rich (as possible) a menu of opportunities so that students leave here as *cosmopolitans*. I love to use that word because it implies more than that you

speak another language or lived for a few months in Kenya. It implies that you are actually comfortable and ready to spend a lot of your life in places other than the United States. You're *cosmopolitan*.

**IE:** What led you to teach in Sierra Leone after college?

**TILGHMAN:** I thought it was important to do public service. And it was the '60s; we wanted to save the world. I also had spent every summer in college working in labs at Queen's and had a very good idea of what graduate school was like. I knew that once you got on that academic treadmill, there was no way to jump off.

**IE:** Princeton extended loan-free aid to international undergraduates right before you became president.

**TILGHMAN:** That was a watershed moment for us. It dramatically changed the nature of the applicant pool. We used to get international students whose parents could afford to pay the very significant tuition and room and board that we charged. Now we're getting the stunningly brilliant Bulgarian mathematician who just comes in and is phenomenally able. Not only can those students now afford Princeton, but in some respects it is every bit as affordable as any university in Europe or Asia or wherever they come from. Our financial aid even covers a trip home each year.

**IE:** Any advice to other colleges and universities that aspire to be more international?

**TILGHMAN:** Whatever you decide, do it in a way consistent with the culture of your university. The answer for Yale is not the answer for Princeton, and the answer for Indiana is not the answer for Princeton. Each of us is going to come to our own particular brand of putting ourselves on the world stage. Know thyself before you do it. **IE**

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