

Global Citizenship Offers Better Solutions

“THE SICK are separated by flimsy strips of yellow police tape from the crying babies and expectant mothers. They subsist on bologna sandwiches and tacos, with portable toilets and no showers.” Thus *The Washington Post* reported from the U.S.-Mexico border nearly a year ago.¹ Since that time the U.S. government has cooperated with the Corrections Corporation of America to open a 2,400-person “family detention facility” at a cost of \$296 per person per day; rights organizations like Amnesty International continue to estimate that 60 percent of the women who undertake undocumented crossings from Mexico to the United States are raped during the journey; and the federal government has overseen tens of thousands of deportations that break apart families, including the recent deportation of Iowa Mennonite pastor Max Villatro, a community member in good standing who left behind four U.S. citizen children and a U.S. Citizen spouse.

Last summer’s events fostered a brief debate on how best to address the presence of nearly 50,000 unaccompanied children in the border region. Yet the news coverage hardly mentioned that the children were merely the latest indicator of humanitarian crisis in a region where every year several hundred individuals dehydrate and die in a baking desert.

What Role Can Higher Education Play?


This crisis has developed in near simultaneity with more than a decade of assertions from higher education leaders that we in colleges and universities either should—or indeed already do—create global citizens. And it reveals just how empty our global citizenship leadership has been. Or it illuminates the extent to which many who use the term global citizen may actually mean globally competitive capitalists who excel across cultures.

There is another way. More robust global citizenship thinking would continue the historic role U.S. institutions

of higher education have played in the promotion and expansion of rights. Our engagement with the value of global citizenship—if we are to be the slightest bit serious about it—must be marked by ferocious theoretical rigor and the attendant effort to make ideals real.

There are of course numerous understandings of the kind of global civic learning universities should be encouraging, but a few approaches have enjoyed more prominence than others. Martha Nussbaum’s articulation of the habits of global citizens suggests that they must develop appreciation for common human dignity, empathy, and the ability to be critically distant from one’s own culture and traditions. The American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) suggests that institutions should develop students’ capacities to recognize, “responsibilities to society—locally, nationally, and globally.” What these and similar definitions hold in common is the notion that ethical commitments and understandings of human dignity must transcend national borders.





Global citizenship requires that we examine all of our actions through the assumption that every single human is equally worthy of respect and dignified treatment.

Even as global citizenship and rights advocates hold tenaciously to a few core components of common human dignity, they leave open the possibility that they may be wrong about some aspects of the human experience. Princeton Philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah suggests that this commitment to fallibilism—the notion that no belief can ever be justified in a conclusive way—is one of the central tenets of cosmopolitan thinking. It is that capaciousness and uncertainty that allows global citizenship

and rights advocates the space to work carefully and respectfully with diverse cultures, all around the world. But it is also that openness that confuses many would-be global citizens.

Commitment to Human Dignity

Commitments to continuous learning and change *do not* suggest that global citizenship is an endlessly relativistic frame through which to celebrate the possibility that everyone is all right. On the contrary, any decent commitment to global citizenship packs punch.

Global citizenship requires that we examine all of our actions through the assumption that every single human is equally worthy of respect and dignified treatment.

In simple terms this suggests that our current conversations regarding children at the border must keep human dignity at the center of the conversation. Representing diverse faiths across the political spectrum, religious leaders have risen to this challenge by articulating that their commitments to human dignity clearly extend to migrants.

Though church and synagogue leaders sometimes comment on specific policy proposals, their real impact lies with their continuous reassertion of the moral commitment required of thousands of years of theological understanding. If universities are indeed institutional citizens committed to public purposes, our leadership voices should also be challenging policymakers and



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citizens to recall and affirm our historical location within ongoing efforts to improve the human condition; that is, within the ongoing development and expansion of rights.

Inherently Universal, Rather than National Principles

Of course, religious institutions have an inherent affinity for leadership on moral issues,

and today’s dialogue on universities suggests they are simply spaces for objective inquiry. This framing of higher education presents an incomplete historical picture, and recalling the active role universities played in advancing democratic citizenship may illuminate opportunities—indeed, obligations—for leadership on global citizenship.

Many of the founders of the United

States insisted upon explicit democratic purposes in educational institutions. The new country needed citizens with values and commitments that would match the newly envisioned democratic reality. Recognizing this, Thomas Jefferson twice tried and failed to get the Virginia legislature to support enhanced access to schools and universities for poor boys and young men. Noah Webster, sometimes referred to as the father of American scholarship and education, called for universal free education to foster national unity. According to historian Frederick Rudolph, “A commitment to the republic became a guiding obligation of the American college.”

Connecting public and university education to the vision of a national democratic project was not unique to the founders. University of Chicago President William Rainey Harper, who recruited John Dewey to that institution in 1894, called the university “the prophet of democracy.” The 1947 Truman Commission report offers an even stronger connection between universities and democratic development. It concludes, “The first and most essential charge upon higher education is that at all levels and in all its fields of specialization, it shall be the carrier of democratic values, ideals, and process.”

As Nussbaum argues, global citizenship is in a sense merely the logical extension of the assertion that all people are created equal. If we do indeed believe in concepts such as inherent human dignity, they are by their nature universal rather than narrowly national ideals. And of course just like with democratic citizenship, global citizenship requires commitment to specific values.

To encourage global citizenship is to develop students’ dispositions toward moral cosmopolitanism. This does not require knowing all of the policy solutions that will lead us to a world that actually enacts a reality of equal human treatment and respect. Rather, moral cosmopolitans clearly affirm a global duty to support basic human rights and justice. Universities embrace the call to affirm a global duty when they claim to educate global citizens. This is a statement

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of value regarding an incomplete tomorrow, a merely imagined project.

It took hundreds of years for the moral imagination enshrined in the Declaration of Independence to apply broadly to 300 million increasingly diverse citizens, and it is still a project in process. This kind of continuous expansion of imagined community is now the task at hand for global citizenship and human rights advocates. As Jack Donnelly writes:

Human rights theories and documents point beyond actual conditions of existence—beyond the ‘real’ in the sense of what has already been realized—to the possible, which is viewed as a deeper human moral reality. Human rights are less about the way people ‘are’ than about what they might become. They are about *moral* [emphasis in original] rather than natural or juridical persons.²

Similarly, global citizenship education is centrally about engaging the moral imagination to imagine a broader “we” and then to envision what we might achieve together. Cultivating empathy and imagining alternative possibilities is not so difficult to do in individual classrooms. In respect to migration in particular, a wealth of strong literature such as Luis Alberto Urrea’s *The Devil’s Highway* or Sonia Nazario’s *Enrique’s Journey* places readers in empathic relationship with individuals whose lives are otherwise often distant. Students are also strongly influenced by short video and audio reporting, such as this New York Times profile of the Missing Migrant Project³ or NPR’s recent series, *borderland*.⁴

Gauging Real Impact

But these kinds of empathy-inducing moves are at the level of the individual classroom, and even there faculty often shy away from

expressing specific values commitments. Rather, the prevailing assumption is that if students are exposed to broader objective knowledge and diversity of perspectives, along with the tools of critical thinking, they will come to see the importance of acceptance, inclusion, and ethics. Yet there is little evidence supporting this assumption. As Arum and Roksa show us in *Academically Adrift*, to a disconcerting extent the effect of exposure to higher education might be summed up as “negligible” (or as demonstrated by the control groups in most of the studies that AAC&U looks at to discern high-impact practices).

It is true that there is a growing evidence base demonstrating particular kinds of efficaciousness for high-impact practices such as deliberately structured and reflective international education, carefully facilitated cross-cultural collaboration, service-learning and community engagement,

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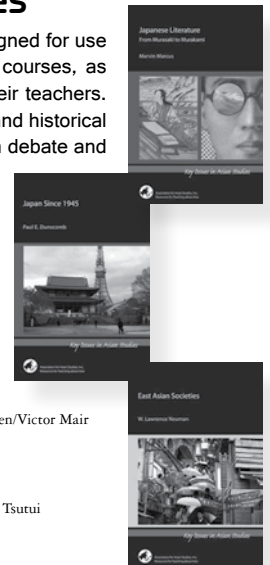
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and first-year seminars. Yet most of these practices remain isolated and episodic, and sometimes they are simply done poorly. Weak forms of international education and community engagement can cement stereotypes and exoticize difference.

To truly advance global citizenship, institutions must strengthen and align their efforts. That requires careful curricular structuring over the span of a student's academic career, coupled with cocurricular and curricular community engagement opportunities. It also requires embracing the reality that the development of global citizenship is the development of a particular values disposition with deep historical and theoretical roots.

Separately, the fields of international education and service-learning/community engagement have been advancing evidence-based best practices for growing students' intercultural competence, civic engagement, and awareness of global citizenship. Yet ironically, few institutions systematically bring together the insights of these disparate areas of practice and research. Even within the individual fields, too often discussion devolves to consideration of tangential issues relating to liability and logistics. To do global citizenship justice, these evidence-based methodologies for experiential learning must deeply engage philosophy, political and social theory, history, and more.

From businesspeople to doctors, developing the skills associated with global citizenship—such as cultural humility and deep respect for others—translates to better professional outcomes, practices, and profits. But more importantly, advancing the spread of a capacious, contingent, and self-consciously reflective commitment to common human dignity is the right thing to do. It is the historic responsibility of the contemporary university.

Developing Moral Muscles

My personal hope across institutional, bureaucratic efforts is that our commitments have teeth—and that we choose appropriate times to bare those teeth. Across disciplines,

global citizenship educators should engage dialogue with an assumption of common human dignity much the same way that economists engage reality with an assumption of rationality. Like any thoughtful intellectuals, educators who are moving forward understanding of common human dignity know that our assumptions may be inaccurate. It is possible that one day we will learn that we have somehow been wrong—that the story of human progress is not the story of increasing our ability to see one another as fully human across contemporary divides. But until then, our classroom dialogue, our analysis, and our university leadership's public pronouncements should feature the assumption that dignified treatment of each human life must be part of the consideration of any policy, anywhere, at any time.

Moving back to the border dialogue, taking this position in support of human dignity won't always provide us with policy

clarity. But it should constantly guide us. It's not a question of efficaciousness (How can we most expeditiously process the minors at the border?). It's a question of ethics (How do we help the babes on our doorstep?). If we believe first in human dignity across all people, it is difficult to see how our secondary desires to simplify our border security and justify our relative wealth should lead to annual dehydrations of (conservatively) hundreds of people, along with incarceration and possible deportation of tens of thousands of children.

As faculty and staff members, we have an obligation to align these areas of practice and deepen our own commitments to continuous learning if we are to change the extent to which universities truly encourage and advance global citizenship. Our institutional leaders—as quixotic as this may sound—must commit to public pronouncements reclaiming higher learning's role as

doing much more than advancing objective inquiry and developing students' capacities to find jobs. Through developing students' moral muscles—strengthening their capacities to cooperate across cultures and see the dignity in all people—we are developing the building blocks of justice. That's the aim of global citizenship. **IE**

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ENDNOTES

- 1 "Central American Migrants Overwhelm Border Patrol Station in Texas," by Nick Miroff and Joshua Partlow, *The Washington Post*, June 14, 2014.
- 2 Jack Donnelly, *Universal Human Rights in Theory and Practice* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003), 15.
- 3 See http://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/18/opinion/bodies-on-the-border.html?_r=2
- 4 See <http://www.npr.org/series/291397809/borderland-dispatches-from-the-u-s-mexico-boundary>

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