

The Internationalization of U.S. Universities—Are We Making Progress?

THE TERRORIST ATTACKS IN NEW YORK CITY AND WASHINGTON, D.C. IN 2001 represent a watershed event that has changed the ways that the United States relates to the world. To protect ourselves and strengthen our borders, we established the Department of Homeland Security, which was the largest reorganization of the government since the National Security Act of 1947. Fortunately, most U.S. universities took the opposite approach; they placed a new emphasis on “internationalization” and announced numerous initiatives to connect with the world, and students responded very positively.

Nine years later, the air has come out of the “internationalization” balloon. Students continue to be interested in schools that have important international programs, but many of the universities that had previously boasted new initiatives have reduced their priority, downgraded programs, dismantled key positions, and reduced resources. Now, with the economic downturn, some of the programs are in danger of elimination, and staff and faculty have fewer funds for international travel, which is central to the construction and maintenance of these programs.

Measuring progress or retrogression is difficult because there is no consensus on the criteria that defines an “international” university. Europe has worked to define criteria and implement both programs and degree structures that facilitate education among their universities, first with the Erasmus and Socrates programs, and now through the Bologna Process. While U.S. universities are not tied together like the Europeans, there are certain basic components to internationalization, which most try to incorporate. These include education abroad; international students; a curriculum with an international component, including languages; partnerships with universities abroad for student and faculty opportunities and joint/dual degree programs; and an international presence in other countries.

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Education Abroad

For most colleges and universities in the United States, education abroad has been and continues to be the centerpiece of an internationalization strategy. This is appropriate because no other program has a more profound impact on educating domestic students to appreciate the world and understand themselves and the United States than does studying abroad.

One measure of internationalization should be the number of students who study abroad (as a percentage of the student body), and a study of 1,070 schools, coordinated by Madeleine Green, found that in 2006, 91 percent of the schools had study abroad programs, up from 65 percent in 2001.¹ But the nature of that experience is as important as the number of students who participate in it. Traditionally, most U.S. students have studied in Europe, often on programs custom-designed for them and administered in English by U.S.-based institutions. They have also tended to go abroad for shorter and shorter periods. The latest *Open Doors* survey shows that more than half of the total number students participating in programs abroad go for periods of two to eight weeks.² Given the increasing importance of understanding other regions in the world, universities should encourage students to study abroad for longer periods, focus on foreign language acquisition, and go to developing nations.

Two types of overseas programs are attractive for students but are of limited instructional value: those that are more tourism than education, and those that send students abroad to study in “enclaves,” living and studying together and taught by professors from their home college or by foreign faculty who have been trained to teach in an American style.

“Tourism”—brief encounters of two to eight weeks—can be educational, and it can expose a person to a wide range of experiences that can open minds to new worlds, but “education” should be more rigorous. Instead of “hand-outs” of a few background articles on a country, the education abroad experience should rely on reading books and writing papers; it should combine studies of the country or region as well as the courses that a student would have at home. The most challenging programs place students in a foreign university and environment—separate from their American friends. In these situations, when they learn, for example, about the “Nineteenth Century History of Europe” in France, they not only learn the subject, they also absorb the ways French students approach the issues, and they can reflect on the differences from the way that Americans approach the same subject. Such a program will provide the skills to understand and appreciate other nations and cultures.

The programs that isolate the students or move students from one country to another every few days are fun, but they represent an inadequate path to in-depth learning. So, in assessing the “internationalization” of a university through its education abroad programs, it is important to quantify the numbers but also to know more about the programs.

International Admissions

International students provide a second dimension of “internationalization.” The United States has long been the principal destination for international students. In 2007, of the three million students enrolled outside their home country, 20 percent were in the United States. The United States remained the largest recipient of international students, but the U.S. share of total international students had declined from 25 percent in 2000 to 20

percent in 2007.³ International students not only are given opportunities to learn about the United States, but they also give U.S. students the chance to learn about their countries and stimulate interest in going there.

Most international students attend U.S. universities full-time, but here at American University (AU) a unique program was intro-

duced, “Abroad at AU,” which sought to turn the education abroad program inside out by bringing top students from dozens of countries around the world for a “junior year” at AU. This has proven to be a very successful program that has grown five-fold from 40 in 2005–06 to 202 students in 2009–10

Curriculum and Language

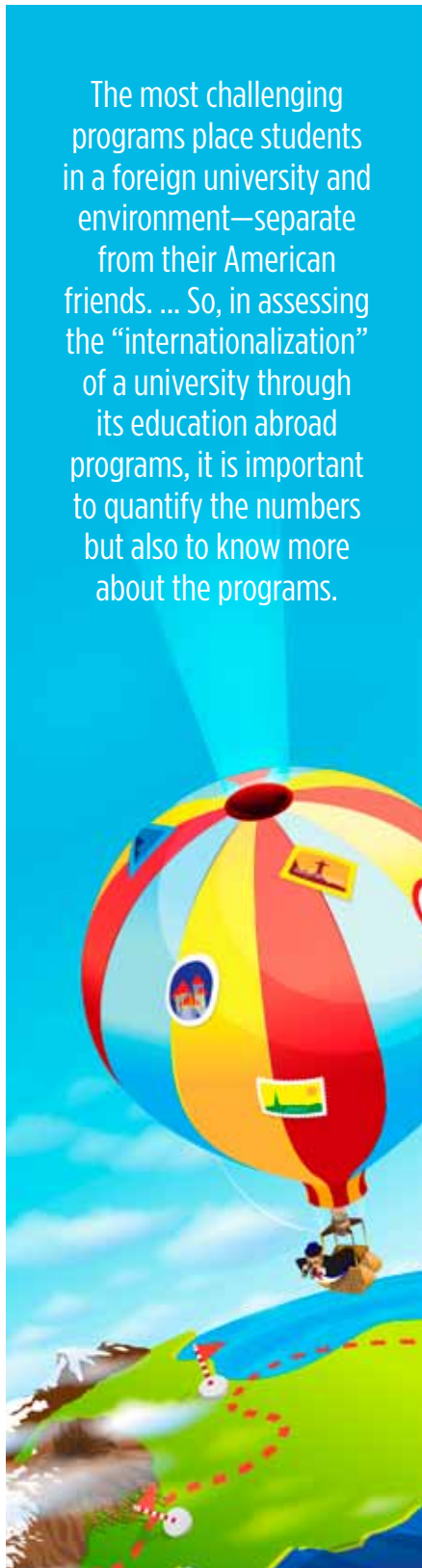
An internationalization strategy needs a curriculum with a significant international component, but Green’s study of 1,070 universities found that only 37 percent required a course with an international or global focus in 2006, down from 41 percent in 2001. One course is better than nothing, but still clearly inadequate. In addition, students should learn a foreign language, but that same study found that only 45 percent of the universities had a language requirement, down from 53 percent in 2001. Of course, the United States is not a particularly good place to learn a foreign language because English is so pervasive, and a semester studying abroad is hardly enough to master a language. At American University, we experimented with a program on “language immersion,” whereby students would spend an entire summer in a foreign country improving their preliminary language skills before beginning their study abroad in the fall. So far the program has only had modest success; more efforts are needed to improve on the model.

An increasing number of students have been drawn to universities with Schools of International Relations, but sometimes those schools grow while the other parts of the university reduce their international programs. This is a mistake. Indeed, it is more important for universities to give priority to instilling some interest in the world in those students with little or no interest in international relations than to provide these services to those who already have decided to focus on the world.

Partnerships and Faculty Exchanges

As education abroad programs proliferate, some U.S. universities transformed informal arrangements with foreign universities

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into broader “partnerships.” These partnerships take many forms. Of the top 25 U.S. universities, 14 have programs, campuses, or centers abroad. Singapore and Qatar are among the most popular hosts. The University of California at Berkeley and the University of Pennsylvania have two programs each in Singapore, and Qatar has an Education City where Cornell Medical School, Georgetown School of Foreign Service, Texas A&M School of Engineering, and several other U.S. universities have built partner schools, which teach small but high-quality classes. American University designed and advised the American University of Sharjah and the American University of Nigeria. The latter emerged as the best

private university in the region by the time of its first commencement in 2009. U.S. universities have also developed joint-degree programs and exchanges of faculty.

One of the problems in building partnerships based on genuine reciprocity is the relatively high tuition and lack of government funding for U.S. universities. That is one of the reasons that the largest number of partnerships have occurred in places like the Middle East and Singapore that can afford to pay. However, there are numerous partnerships in other parts of the world where universities have been creative in fashioning alternative ways to connect home and host universities. These new-style partnerships should be encouraged.

Another element of internationalization strategies focuses on faculty development and geographically based research centers. Universities have begun to offer incentives for travel, research, and lectures abroad for faculty whose expertise is not in an international field, and some universities provide support and coordination for research centers. Unfortunately, when there is a fiscal problem, the resources for these initiatives tend to be reduced first.

Organization and Priority

To internationalize successfully, a university needs to assign it a high priority and designate a very senior individual (either a vice president or, in large universities, a deputy provost) to be responsible for the full range of activities with sufficient staff and resources to implement comprehensive internationalization. This is where the performance of U.S. universities has been the most uneven and the gap between rhetoric and performance has been widest. Only about 40 percent of the universities in Green’s study reference “international” or “global” in their mission statement. Of the top 50 U.S. national universities, about two-thirds have established an administrative focus for international programs. Four are vice presidents, though only one reports directly to the president. Twenty-eight have vice provosts or associate provosts or similar posts. The rest are advisers or directors.

The degree to which a university is committed to international programs can be discerned in several ways. If the education abroad office is funded as a “self-support” unit, then, it is rarely an integral part of the institution’s curriculum. If there is little or no financial aid for international students, one could conclude that the university is more interested in full tuition than diversification. When a new position is created to direct international programs, but that person has no funds or staff and reports to a person three levels below the president, then the gesture is more symbolic than real.

Establishing an office and setting a priority is a first step; maintaining it for an extended period of time is equally important. Without a focused, comprehensive internationalization strategy, individual

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units within the institution will engage in their own activities, which are likely to result in many inefficiencies and duplication of efforts and even programs.

A system for measuring internationalization is essential to be able to discern progress or retrogression and for universities to see which of the elements of internationalization they would like to emphasize. Some of the yardsticks are quantitative and thus easier to measure. For example, the internationalization tables should include:

- Number of students studying abroad as a percentage of the student population;
- Number of students studying abroad for a semester or longer;
- Percentage of students studying in non-traditional (non-European) areas;
- Number of students studying in foreign universities as percent of students studying abroad;
- Number of permanent international students on campus as a percentage of student population;

- Number of short-term international students on campus;
- Number of language immersion students going abroad;
- Number of international courses required for undergraduate education.

Other indicators do not lend themselves to precise measurement—for example, the curriculum, the style of the education abroad programs, and the new partnerships. Assessing priority or organizational mechanisms are also difficult. Nonetheless, it is not possible to measure progress effectively without first developing a framework for identifying and assessing internationalization.

In the twenty-first century, more than ever before, an education that focuses exclusively on a student's home country is inadequate. Understanding the world today is analogous to being able to read the street signs in a major city. Without those skills, the United States will suffer many accidents. Universities have to find new ways to educate their students to a changing world, and

we need to critically assess those efforts every five years to remain on the frontier of knowledge. **IE**

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ENDNOTES

1. Green, Madeleine, Dao T. Luu, and Beth Burris, *Mapping Internationalization on U.S. Campuses*, 2008 edition (Washington, D.C.: American Council on Education).
2. *Open Doors 2009: Report on International Educational Exchange*. (New York, N.Y.: Institute for International Education)
3. OECD, *Education at a Glance 2009: OECD Indicators, 2009*.



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