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Humanizing Our Work With Globally Mobile Students

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There is no question that global student exchange is mutually beneficial, with material benefits to the higher education enterprise and students benefiting by gaining increased intercultural learning and global-mindedness. Yet in recent years, the discourse around globally mobile students often resemble trade commodities between host and home countries (Yao 2021). International students to the United States are often lauded for their economic contributions as well as increasing the diversity representation on college campuses (Yao and Viggiano 2019).

Simultaneously, U.S. students participating in education abroad contribute to the commercialization of cross-border programs and gain a global consciousness that also contributes to their future employability. As a result, conversations about globally mobile students often position them as commodities that bring economic gain and global prestige. In doing so, globally mobile students are objectified by institutions and organizations, with scholars such as Castiello-Gutierrez and Li (2020) reminding us that students are “more than your paycheck.” Thus, engaging in humanizing approaches and recognizing the individual needs (e.g., financial, family, health) of globally mobile students amidst broader global issues is important.

Overall, the pandemic upended many of the practices and operations of higher education around the world, in ways seldom imagined in this lifetime. Campuses were shut down, faculty and staff worked from home, and college students had to navigate a new normal. Much of the discourse related to the pandemic seems to identify it as a once-in-a-lifetime issue within unprecedented times. Simply stated, the pandemic was treated as something that would eventually end and then everything would go back to normal.

Yet the ramifications of the pandemic left a lasting mark on globally mobile students, beyond the period in which travel restrictions and inter/national policies were continually shifting. International offices quickly responded in turn by addressing the needs of anxious students, from arranging food/supply drives for quarantining students to working around the clock to ensure the safety and return of students studying abroad.

The commodification of globally mobile students has been apparent throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, with much of the emphasis on institutions’ lost finances and reduced tuition dollars due to travel restrictions. Although the pandemic is often identified as an acute issue, the past two years have illuminated many of the chronic problems in the world and in higher education. Acute conditions are considered to be severe and sudden in onset, which accurately reflects the COVID-19 pandemic; chronic issues, on the other hand, are defined as long-developing syndromes that may worsen over time with long lasting effects. The pandemic served as an acute issue that also illuminated chronic stressors in higher education, especially for globally mobile students. For example, international students in the United States were directly affected by

the attempt by the United States Immigration and Customs Enforcement to implement a policy change in July 2020 that required students to take in-person classes despite many campuses announcing virtual classes (U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement 2020). Although this was an acute problem that arose and was later rescinded, the policy change highlighted how international students and higher education institutions had to continually navigate chronic issues like changing immigration policies due to changing politics and policies. Similarly, U.S. students were restricted from studying abroad when most campuses paused their education abroad offerings for a full year, leading to decreased revenue for higher education institutions and education abroad service providers. Again, the travel restrictions were an acute issue caused by the pandemic, but it highlighted downsides of higher education's financial reliance on education abroad as a significant money maker.

Higher education stakeholders have a responsibility to disrupt the chronic commodifying discourse related to globally mobile students. Therefore, it is essential that they approach their work from a humanizing perspective and remember that all students deserve to be treated as human beings in policy, practice, and discourse. In the next few sections, thought-provoking questions and examples of humanizing practices are presented that highlight humanizing ways to support globally mobile students.

RECOGNIZE THE DIFFERENT NEEDS AMONG GLOBALLY MOBILE STUDENTS

What kind of support is needed by students of different academic levels, such as graduate students who may bring their families and children with them to the United States?

Globally mobile students in the United States have different needs based on their academic levels, region of origin, ethnicities, languages, and religions. Globally mobile students also represent a variety of backgrounds, education levels, and family responsibilities. However, most discussions about globally mobile students on U.S. campuses focus on undergraduate students, which includes international students and students studying abroad. Yet, according to the 2021 Open Doors report (Institute of International Education 2021), the population size of international graduate students is only slightly below that of undergraduates. Establishing spouse and family programs such as the International Spouses and

Partners English Program at New York University are examples of best practices that humanize the broader identity of graduate students who may be studying abroad with families.

How can international educators better meet the different needs of students before studying abroad?

One cannot assume that all students studying abroad hold the same level of experience and readiness for global travel. For example, some students may have done significant prior international travel with their families or lived in another country, yet for some others, this may be the first time they hold a passport. To address this challenge, one approach is to have targeted and specific pre-departure sessions that will allow faculty and education abroad staff the opportunity to address relevant information based on student needs. For example, the University of California Education Abroad Program created a website that includes blogs and resources for University of California students considering education abroad. They include blogs and photo stories created by students, including one by a first-generation student who gives advice for first time travelers and another about the complicated process for getting a travel visa. By providing targeted programming based on multiple identities and experiences, students are humanized, especially when considering their lives beyond the classroom.

ACKNOWLEDGE AND IDENTIFY GLOBAL RACIAL DYNAMICS

What are ways to proactively provide context to international students on campus?

Racial dynamics are constantly shifting around the world, with much of the issues rooted in anti-Blackness which was especially evident during the COVID-19 pandemic (Beaman 2020). Taking into consideration how globally mobile students are affected by issues related to ethnocentrism and racism is critical for faculty and administrators. An example is how teaching assistants are affected by the racialized perceptions of the students that they teach. Supervisors have a responsibility for addressing how student evaluations for international instructors are often couched with racialized and nativist frames related to language and accents. Thus, supervisors have a dual responsibility regarding course evaluations—first, to prepare students on how to give constructive feedback focused on their learning and engagement, and second, to review completed teaching evaluations with teaching assistants to deconstruct and contextualize feedback. It is important for faculty and administrators to remain aware of different racial perceptions as students are

often re/racialized while they are abroad. Similarly, higher education administrators in the U.S. may need to respond to questions about the sociohistorical foundations of racial dynamics in the United States because contemporary issues such as anti-Asian sentiments and anti-Blackness are rooted in U.S. history. Current issues and events must be addressed quickly.

For example, responsive programming was implemented by the International Students and Scholars office at the University of South Carolina during the pandemic to address the rise in anti-Asian hate crimes in the United States. The conversations during town hall sessions were difficult, but outcomes included more open communication between students and administrators and focused support for international students of color on a more regular basis. In addition, faculty have a responsibility to remain sensitive to these issues because fear of micro and macro-aggressions affects student engagement in the classroom, which lead to difficulty concentrating in class (as either a student or teaching assistant) if one is afraid for their physical safety walking across campus.

How can adequate support be provided to racially minoritized students who may experience discrimination while abroad?

Globally mobile students are also situated with the racialized contexts of their host countries, yet pre-departure orientations rarely address deeper sociohistorical foundations beyond some “cultural differences.” Students in the U.S. who choose to study abroad tend to be white women, with lower representation from racially minoritized student populations (Institute of International Education 2021). In addition, racially minoritized students may experience discrimination and othering when abroad, and faculty and administrators must be attuned to these global racial dynamics in order to humanize the education abroad experience. As stated by Columbus State University’s (2022) webpage on inclusiveness while abroad, students “may also find that how you self-identify is not how you are identified abroad.” To address these issues, several institutions, such as Columbus State University and Prairie View A&M University, include resources on their education abroad website that provide information for multiple student identities, including students of color, LGBTQ+ students, and students with disabilities.

Highlighting these resources during both in-person and virtual pre-departure sessions would provide preparation for all students.

PAY ATTENTION TO GLOBAL POLITICS AFFECTING STUDENT MOBILITY

How often do faculty and administrators provide detailed insights on the sociohistorical foundations and geopolitical activities of the student’s host country?

As previously discussed, student mobility globally was challenged during the pandemic with travel restrictions and changing immigration policies. Although the hope is that these difficulties are an acute issue, the reality is that immigration and open travel are constantly contested and have been over many years due to changing geopolitics and policies. When potentially distressing events occur around the world, students are greatly affected as they worry about family, finances, and their own personal health and well-being. Preparing for any upcoming changes in the future is a critical component to consider for all involved. For international students, any immigration updates and changes cause stress and anxiety, especially for graduate students who may have to worry about family members who may have moved with them. For international educators, all policy changes, especially those expected for quick implementation, bring stress and worry, especially when navigating the tensions of supporting students and adhering to strict policies. Overall, U.S. policies related to immigration and international exchange are very much rooted in current geopolitical priorities and may at times be grounded in discriminatory practices due to perceived differences in race, religion, and language.

How can education abroad leaders adequately prepare all student travelers to be globally and culturally conscious of their new host community?

Attention to global politics and policies is needed for globally mobile students, especially students studying abroad. Geopolitics are constantly changing and there are currently many instances of civil unrest happening in multiple countries around world. Understanding the legal policies and rules that may allow/prohibit them from participating in protests or engage in other political activities that may lead to arrest is essential.

A possible suggestion would be to carefully tailor pre-departure meetings and information in ways that are country specific, with attention paid to current politics and policies. Several resources currently exist that can be used, including valuable curated information on [Diversity Abroad's](#) website. Resources include identity-based blog post from students who traveled to specific countries as well as in-depth diversity and inclusion guides that include current issues occurring in-country.

CONCLUSION

So now what? In thinking about the future directions in international higher education, incorporating intentional humanizing approaches to work with globally mobile students can make a significant difference in student experiences and learning outcomes. Shifting the discourse that commodifies students to one that recognizes the humanity and diversity of all students who bring multiple talents, knowledge, and contributions will contribute to a stronger global academic world. As unveiled during the COVID-19 pandemic, globally mobile students remain vulnerable to global events and geopolitics that may affect their ability to engage in their academic careers. Thus, it is imperative that higher education faculty, administrators, and associations continue to engage in humanizing approaches to better support globally mobile students. As eloquently stated by Castiello-Gutierrez and Li (2020), “every single student is a story, every single one of us has a life in this country, and that our lives are inherently connected with the life of others” (p. ii). How can we, as international educators, ensure that we honor each student’s story and develop relationships that allow all—students, administrators, faculty, and the broader higher education enterprise—to flourish? In doing so, we move closer to the promise of international education as a way to build a more understanding and connected world.

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