

The Climate for Progress in International Education

Mestenhauser, Josef. 2011. *Reflections on the Past, Present, and Future of Internationalizing Higher Education: Discovering Opportunities to Meet the Challenges*. Minneapolis: Global Programs and Strategy Alliance.

Reviewed by Bryan McAllister-Grande, Harvard University

Josef Mestenhauser has two PhDs and has published more than 120 articles and books on international education during a career spanning six decades. His latest book, *Reflections on the Past, Present, and Future of Internationalizing Higher Education* (2011), is perhaps his most ambitious work yet. This is a monograph of staggering breadth and erudition, from one of the field's most innovative thinkers. It both summarizes and surpasses all of his past work. So far, however, *Reflections* has sparked little reflection from the field.

In this essay I analyze the ideas of the new book against the recent history of the internationalization movement. While Mestenhauser's earlier writings helped catalyze that movement, he now hopes to take that movement in an advanced critical direction. However, that hope arrives simultaneously as international educators themselves question the future of the field. Ironically, the very type of leadership that Mestenhauser and his peers offered in the late 1990s may now seem too idealistic to the practical orientation of the current moment. As I argue in the conclusion, that view is a mistake, one out of touch with the rest of the academy -- and with the world outside.

Mestenhauser Helps Launch the Systems View

The learning-centered approach that Mestenhauser pioneered centers on the importance of *systematic or holistic thinking*, a type of thinking he has compared to a hologram, or to painting a multidimensional portrait. He articulated this view of the field primarily in two volumes: *Reforming the Higher Education Curriculum: Internationalizing the Campus* (1996) and *Rockin' in Red Square: Critical Approaches to International Education in the Age of Cyberculture* (2003). In those works, as well as in this new book, Mestenhauser describes international education as a "knowledge system" (p. 6). As a knowledge system, it is more than a separate field or profession; rather, it is a "super-center" encompassing sixteen different academic disciplines, the profession itself, multiple methods of social and scientific analysis, and many different cultural manifestations. This holistic approach was initially meant to counter the typical model of U. S. international education, which had tended to treat each part (education abroad, culture, international students, the rest of the academy, etc.) as a separate sphere.

When *Reforming the Higher Education Curriculum* and *Rockin' in Red Square* were first published, "internationalization" was still a fringe word in U.S. higher education—better known to European and Asian audiences than American ones. A few authors were publishing on it, and some universities employed the term, but the idea of treating international education holistically had been forgotten since the golden era of the 1940s. Mestenhauser, along with authors such as Philip Altbach, Hans de Wit, Madeleine Green, and Jane Knight (as well as many others), helped recover international education's long history as something much larger and more complex. Soon after, the American Council on Education began embracing internationalization as a mantra. Universities experimented with new offices devoted to international affairs. More

recently, NAFSA reorganized its “sections” into “knowledge communities” and promoted “pan-NAFSA” approaches; it also altered its strategic plan toward “comprehensive internationalization,” a distinction meant to further emphasize holism. In the heady climate of the late ‘90s and early 2000s, Mestenhauser’s efforts seemed highly innovative and refreshing. He helped bring attention back to *learning* and back to *culture* as the major connecting features of our work. His work also promised to bridge the great divide between faculty and administrators.

Yet, as these movements developed, the results also seemed less clear. Institutions experienced significant setbacks in sustaining them. Efforts to promote cross-fertilization among units and departments, while promising, often stalled—or they produced the opposite effect, where “a thousand flowers bloomed.” Further, as Jane Knight (2008) has noted, the internationalization movement produced several unintended consequences—increased competition between universities to become world-class, elitism, branch campuses, market-driven priorities, and low quality. There has been a recent backlash against the supposed superficiality of internationalization, a situation ironic given the learning-centered approach initially offered by those like Mestenhauser.

Progress and Innovation in a Constricted Environment

Reflections, therefore, arrives at an odd time for our field. On the one hand, the field is expanding rapidly. On the other, Knight and other scholars are questioning whether internationalization is reaching an “end” or a “mid-life crisis.” The International Association of Universities recently released a statement entitled “Rethinking Internationalization,” which asks, “Has internationalization lost sight of its central purposes?” and aims to convene a global working group. Hans de Wit (2013) has recently pondered ditching the term altogether.

Meanwhile, on campuses, budgets are being cut and resources are being redirected. At the University of Wisconsin-Madison—a noted leader in international education—a faculty group recommended to dissolve a central Division of International Studies in favor of a more diffused approach. More visibly, the faculty bodies at Yale, Duke, and New York University are actively protesting their institutions’ forays into the branch campus movement. While these campaigns against internationalization are not usually directed at international educators *per se*, but rather at presidents and other administrators, they can often seem like a collective attack against the field and our work.

When any group feels threatened, the natural human tendency is to return into familiar and comfortable positions. True innovation is at risk. I wonder how much cognitive space there is for international educators to define progress in a climate where survival matters. When divisions of international studies are dissolved and internationalization is questioned, leaders like Mestenhauser are then deemed radical, or are simply set aside, until later.

The New Arguments

Mestenhauser’s own approach to these issues is also, admittedly, quite critical and philosophical; the new work is probably his most philosophical. In *Reflections*, he turns a mirror on the assumptions behind the field itself, finding their basis in the structure of the U.S. academy and its entrenched epistemologies. While acknowledging many improvements over the last ten to fifteen years, he now both defends and critiques the internationalization movement that he helped to spawn.

While Mestenhauser's earlier works also deal with intellectual assumptions, *Reflections* delves much deeper into their history and scope. He argues that educators still face major barriers in changing their own mindsets, and the internationalization movement did little to alter them. While our policies and practices can shift quite easily to embrace the systems view, changing our underlying ways of thinking requires significant cognitive reconstruction. To simply "internationalize" is not enough.

Mestenhauser advances his critiques in two major directions that I outline briefly here. The first is to interrogate our understanding of the "culture concept," the key framework that unites our field. In his view, the idea of culture has become distorted from its original formulation via the field of anthropology in the early twentieth century. Once meant to explain almost everything, culture has now become a thing to be studied or a category of analysis. Drawing heavily on the work of anthropologist-psychologist Norbert Ross, Mestenhauser notes that culture has a "fading quality" that should make us resist reductionist definitions (p. 154). "Culture is the operating system through which new ideas are received or rejected," he states; thus it can distort the knowledge we have or acquire by others (p. 159, 280). Culture also encompasses every academic field, and thus Mestenhauser is critical of the recent efforts to define global competence. "While it is important to communicate cross-culturally, one always communicates about something and that something might be any field of study, occupation, or profession whose knowledge base may be equally as culturally determined, as is the process of communication," he says—again, referencing the early insights of anthropology.

Mestenhauser's second major critique extends from the first. As he also notes in the foreword of the new book, *The SAGE Handbook of International Higher Education* (see Emily Gorlewski's essay in this issue), our definitions of internationalization are also culture bound in ways we do not fully recognize. Here, Mestenhauser's aim is to deconstruct the epistemologies and structures of U.S. higher education, which he calls "analytic" or "positivist."

The main sections of the book are devoted to "six challenges" to the field at large, which all stem from these analytic and positivist traditions.

- The tendency to regard international education as a "holding corporation" rather than a system of knowledge with a sophisticated and global intellectual tradition.
- Cognitive barriers, especially the positivist tradition of inquiry, best associated with scientific method.
- The difficulty of placing culture at the core of the academic enterprise, and treating all knowledge as culture-bound.
- The dilemmas of improving graduate instruction and faculty training, where many young researchers are trained in these positivist traditions.
- The cognitive shifts needed to internationalizing the curriculum through epistemology, *not* through adding international topics and issues.
- The complexity of rethinking the organizational structures for international education

While Mestenhauser's proposed reforms addressing these challenges are hugely ambitious (including reorganizing international education into a major division of knowledge, and creating a new diploma in "Global Systems"), I contend that we need to pay sustained attention to them for two major reasons.

First, his critiques of the positivist and analytical traditions are well in tune with the prevailing winds of change in the U.S. academy. Faculty members have emerged from the recent culture, theory, and science wars with no clear path ahead, but there has been a marked tendency

to explore post-positivist ways of knowing the world. Links between the sciences, the humanities, and religion are growing more and more robust each day. While positivist methods still dominate in some key disciplines and professional schools, they have increasingly been questioned in others (Steinmetz 2005).

Second, non-Western cultures are now asserting themselves in the global sphere of ideas. The almost simultaneous recovery of non-Western ways of knowing (including a new appreciation for the kind of holistic and open systems thinking characteristic of many Confucian, Buddhist, many other traditions) has opened up the possibilities for truly interdisciplinary and global collaboration.

I believe we need to take these ideas seriously if we want the field to truly thrive in the twenty-first century. Our old models—culture shock, regional debriefings, superficial discussions on food and customs—are no longer adequate for this new world. The recent trend toward analyzing the “culture concept” and internationalization from the perspective of other cultural traditions—spearheaded by Darla Deardorff and others—is a step in the right direction. It needs to be taken much further. If we do not take these ideas more seriously, if we cannot look beyond our current crisis toward the wider, future world, internationalization as currently practiced in the United States *will* likely end—or, rather, the field will simply be left behind.

References

de Wit, Hans. 2013. “Reconsidering the Concept of Internationalization,” *International Higher Education*, No. 70 (Winter 2013).

Ellingboe, Brenda and Josef Mestenhauser, eds. 1996. *Reforming the Higher Education Curriculum: Internationalizing the Campus*. Phoenix, AZ: Oryx Press.

Knight, Jane. 2008. *Higher Education in Turmoil: The Changing World of Internationalization*. Rotterdam, The Netherlands: Sense Publishers.

Mestenhauser, Josef. 2003. “In Search of a Comprehensive Approach to International Education: A Systems Perspective,” in Walter Grünzweig and Nana Rinehart, eds., *Rockin’ in Red Square: Critical Approaches to International Education in the Age of Cyberculture*. Münster, Germany: Lit Verlag.

Steinmetz, George, ed. 2005. *The Politics of Method in the Human Sciences: Positivism and its Epistemological Others*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.