Global Learning: Aligning Student Learning Outcomes with Study Abroad

Kevin Hovland
Director, Global Learning and Curricular Change
Association of American Colleges and Universities

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Introduction

Many campus leaders, including both faculty members and administrators, are more intentionally aligning the goals of undergraduate education with the realities of an interdependent and interconnected world. Some are motivated by a fear of U.S. competitive failure vis-à-vis other educational systems; others are driven by the sense that the problems we face today are qualitatively different—more complex, more interdisciplinary, and more directly tied to understanding of other nations and cultures. Some describe their efforts as “internationalizing” higher education; others talk about making college more “global.” Most view study (or education) abroad as an important arena in which students can develop new perspectives, test new identities, and make new commitments to the world. Multiple stakeholders in global/international education will find it useful to situate their various efforts within the broader context of a student learning outcomes movement in higher education.

In this short essay, I argue that:

1. Campuses interested in developing student capacity for global citizenship or engagement must clearly and intentionally establish what the related student learning outcomes are in general education, the majors, and study abroad. Such experiences should include exploration of interdependence, power, and privilege.
2. Such experiences should include exploration of interdependence, power, and privilege.
3. Campuses can do this by exploring “big global questions” that demand integration of knowledge, skills, and personal and social responsibility.
4. Such integrative learning requires multiple opportunities for students to address global issues at increasing levels of complexity—opportunities that will occur in the curriculum as well as in study abroad contexts.

As educators strive to provide the best education for unscripted global challenges, they are drawing upon, updating, and reinvigorating the strong traditions of liberal education. It can be helpful for those working primarily in study abroad to understand this tradition and use its language. By liberal education, I mean

. . . an approach to learning that empowers individuals and prepares them to deal with complexity, diversity, and change. It provides students with broad knowledge of the wider world as well as in-depth study in a specific area of interest. A liberal education helps students develop a sense of social responsibility, as well as strong and transferable intellectual and practical skills such as communication, analytical and problem-solving skills, and a demonstrated ability to apply knowledge and skills in real-world settings. . . . Today, a liberal education usually
includes a general education curriculum that provides broad learning in multiple disciplines and ways of knowing, along with more in-depth study in a major. ([www.aacu.org/leap/what_is_liberal_education.cfm](http://www.aacu.org/leap/what_is_liberal_education.cfm))

Global learning is very closely connected to liberal education and is a potential bridge from study abroad to multiple sites of campus innovation because it focuses on student learning outcomes and provides a shared vocabulary around which to build alliances. For those who work in the fields of international education and study abroad, the national emergence of global learning as a way to organize work across campus has the potential to transform undergraduate education by synthesizing and magnifying multiple movements focusing on student learning.
Learning-Centered Institutions and Essential Learning Outcomes

In their influential article, “From Teaching to Learning—A New Paradigm for Undergraduate Education,” Robert Barr and John Tagg (1995) sketched what it would mean if institutional mission and practice were driven by the final goal (what students are learning) rather than the means to that goal (what instruction is provided). Explicit in such a reorganization of institutions is the idea that well-articulated student learning outcomes should drive the design of curricular experiences. As Barr and Tagg argued (1995, 10), “The college devoted to learning first identifies the knowledge and skills it expects its graduates to possess, without regard to any particular curriculum or educational experiences. It then determines how to assess them reliably.”

Colleges and universities have answered the call to become more learning centered and so have led a major national movement to define learning outcomes for undergraduate education. AAC&U has collected these outcomes and refined campus practice into a general consensus framework for liberal education. The resulting Essential Learning Outcomes have served as a starting point for discussions across the country (and the world) as educators have worked together to define “College Learning for the New Global Century” (Association of American Colleges and Universities 2007).

The Essential Learning Outcomes represent a very broad framework for liberal education that should begin in school and continue into students’ college studies. All students should gain the following in their education.

- **Knowledge of Human Cultures and the Physical and Natural World**
  - Through study in the sciences and mathematics, social sciences, humanities, histories, languages, and the arts
  
  Focused by engagement with big questions, both contemporary and enduring.

- **Intellectual and Practical Skills**
  - Inquiry and analysis
  - Critical and creative thinking
  - Written and oral communication
  - Quantitative literacy
  - Information literacy
  - Teamwork and problem solving

  Practiced extensively, across the curriculum, in the context of progressively more challenging problems, projects, and standards for performance.

- **Personal and Social Responsibility**
  - Civic knowledge and engagement—local and global
  - Intercultural knowledge and competence
  - Ethical reasoning and action
  - Foundations and skills for lifelong learning

  Anchored through active involvement with diverse communities and real-world challenges.
• **Integrative Learning**
  - Synthesis and advanced accomplishment across general and specialized studies

  Demonstrated through the application of knowledge, skills, and responsibilities to new settings and complex problems. (Association of American Colleges and Universities 2007, 3).

  Such broad outcomes can serve as the foundations of undergraduate curricula, general education designs, departmental objectives, course content, and, of course, general education experiences. The power of the outcomes is significantly increased when they make up the common expectations across multiple sites of learning. In that way, students recognize their own learning goals within the outcomes and come to understand how the disparate parts of their education—like general education, the major, and study abroad—fit together into a coherent whole. When student learning outcomes are the shared language across campus, students will have a “map” by which to navigate their individual journey through the curriculum and cocurriculum and a framework upon which to integrate their learning.
Defining Global Learning

Students come to college hoping to change the world. While they are there, what opportunities do they have to test such hopes in practice? And when they graduate, will they know how to do it? The Essential Learning Outcomes can readily become a framework for global learning to help students prepare for twenty-first century global challenges. This is clear if we focus on the four pathways to learning, listed below, connected to each of the essential learning categories. Global learning, I would suggest, is:

- Focused by engagement with big questions, both contemporary and enduring.
- Practiced extensively, across the curriculum, in the context of progressively more challenging problems, projects, and standards for performance.
- Anchored through active involvement with diverse communities and real-world challenges.
- Demonstrated through the application of knowledge, skills, and responsibilities to new settings and complex problems (Association of American Colleges and Universities 2007, 3).

Through these pathways, the tradition and enduring power of a liberal education framework can be translated into context-rich engagement with complex and urgent global issues, in other words, into a framework for global learning that provides students with opportunities to:

- Gain a deep comparative knowledge of the world’s peoples and problems.
- Explore the historical legacies that have created the dynamics and tensions of the world.
- Develop intercultural competencies so they can move across boundaries and unfamiliar territory and see the world from multiple perspectives.
- Gain the scientific knowledge needed to understand the global contexts of critical civic issues such as sustainability, climate change, or energy.
- Sustain difficult conversations in the face of highly emotional and perhaps uncongenial differences.
- Understand—and perhaps redefine—democratic principles and practices within a global context.
- Gain opportunities to engage in practical work with fundamental issues that affect communities not yet well served by their societies.
- See how their actions and ideas will influence the world in which they live.

Through its Shared Futures: Global Learning & Social Responsibility initiative, AAC&U helps colleges and universities to challenge their students “to explore the relational nature of their identities—identifies that are variously shaped by the currents of power and privilege, both within a multicultural U.S. democracy and within an interconnected and unequal world. Such an approach ensures that global learning is not seen as something that occurs only abroad or as something that relates to students from other places. Global learning occurs everywhere and is relevant to all of our students” (Association of American Colleges and Universities 2006).

While we emphasize the capacious nature of global learning and its potential to bring coherence across all areas of curricular and cocurricular life on campus, the global learning outcomes and pathways are ideally suited to the development of high quality, transformative, study abroad experiences. Students have different sets of expectations and goals for different study abroad experiences, but when colleges and universities explicitly identify the essential learning outcomes of their study abroad program, the student can see in this one course of study an exemplar of the integration of
general education and advanced work in the major within a broader educational vision.

In particular, study abroad and general education can be linked by a common approach to “big questions.” In the report from AAC&U’s signature initiative, Liberal Education and America’s Promise (LEAP), “College Learning for the New Global Century,” the authors challenge us to rethink the larger purposes of education:

But the frontiers of knowledge, both in scholarship and the world of work, now call for cross-disciplinary inquiry, analysis and application. The major issues and problems of our time—from ensuring global sustainability to negotiating international markets to expanding human freedom—transcend individual disciplines. The core subjects provide a necessary foundation, but they should not be taught as ends in themselves. From school through college, students need rich opportunities to explore “big questions” through multifaceted perspectives drawn from multiple perspectives.

The report continues:

But the learning students need for the new global era cannot be achieved simply by rearranging the existing patchwork of “core courses” at the school level and “general education requirements” at the college level. To help students achieve the essential learning outcomes, it will be necessary to spend time, across all levels of school and college education, revisiting the larger purposes of education and rethinking the kinds of connections across disciplines and levels of learning that will best prepare graduates for a complex and fast-paced world. (Association of American Colleges and Universities 2007, 20)

As Barr and Tagg remind us, the outcomes should drive the design of educational experiences, not existing curricular structures. Educators cannot simply add courses to address “big questions” that cross disciplines and divisions. Instead, AAC&U invites them to rethink and redesign multiple learning opportunities in which students can make steady progress toward achieving the goals. These learning experiences must be linked more intentionally across the curriculum and also represent an opportunity to move learning out of the classroom and into the world. One way to connect such educational experiences is around large, complex, interdisciplinary questions that frame every part of academic affairs and student life on campus. For instance, there were two such questions that drove the design of AAC&U’s Shared Futures initiative, “What does it mean to be a responsible citizen in today’s global context? And how should one act in the face of large, unsolved global problems?” (2006). But that is only a beginning. The problems we face today and the challenges our graduates will confront with growing urgency are increasingly defined as global problems: environment and technology, health and disease, conflict and insecurity, poverty and development. Similarly, the goals of democracy, freedom, equity, justice, and peace encompass the globe and demand deep understanding from multiple perspectives. Such problems can effectively integrate student learning across the essential learning outcomes, demonstrating for students the deep connections between knowledge, skills, and personal and social responsibility. And study abroad can provide a laboratory experience for exploring these connections.
High Impact Practices

As more and more educators focus on learning outcomes, they necessarily give greater attention to the methods that ensure selected outcomes are met. Evidence has been mounting about what those methods are. Examining data from the National Survey of Student Engagement, George Kuh identifies several learning activities that are high-impact in *High-Impact Educational Practices: What They Are, Who Has Access to Them, and Why They Matter*. Kuh describes five characteristics that make a practice high impact (2008).

1. They “demand that students devote considerable time and effort to purposeful tasks” (14).
2. They place “students in circumstances that essentially demand they interact with faculty and peers about substantive matters, typically over extended periods of time” (14).
3. “Participating in one or more of these activities increases the likelihood that students will experience diversity through contact with people who are different from themselves” (15).
4. “. . . students typically get frequent feedback about their performance” (17).
5. “. . . Participation in these activities provides opportunities for students to see how what they are learning works in different settings, on and off campus.” (17).

Looking at the following list of high impact practices, it is evident that they are ideally positioned for deep and meaningful exploration of global issues. And in fact, colleges and universities across the country are experimenting on doing just that. Through its Shared Futures: Global Learning & Social Responsibility initiative, AAC&U helps colleges and universities more visibly align their global learning goals through curriculum and faculty development projects. Some of the resulting promising practices are reported below.

**Common Intellectual Experiences (Core or Vertically Organized General Education Curriculum)**

Arcadia University has revised its undergraduate general education curriculum with a two-pronged approach to global learning. In Global Connections Experience and Reflection, students are required to spend a semester in a community different from the one in which they grew up. Arcadia students are encouraged to think about global learning not “out there” but rather connected to their own concerns, communities, and commitments. A second curricular element revisits and reinforces the first. Arcadia students are also required to complete two courses that focus on Global Connections as Intellectual Practice. The two curricular elements share identical learning outcomes. (Arcadia University 2010).

The Otterbein College faculty has also recently approved a significant revision of its integrative studies program (general education) (Otterbein College 2010). Its five overlapping sets of goals and outcomes illustrates the challenge of designing a curriculum for global learning and the need for multiple strategies and developmentally staggered experiences for students to test themselves against the goals. The stated mission of the program is to “prepare Otterbein undergraduates for the challenges and complexity of a 21st century world. It foregrounds interdisciplinary and integrative skills, competencies, and ways of knowing and is committed to the premise that one’s learning should serve and shape one’s chosen responsibilities in and to the world.” That mission is developed through five goals:

1. To inspire intellectual curiosity about the world as it is and a deeper understanding of the global condition.
2. To assist students in cultivating intercultural knowledge and competencies.
3. To promote active and critical reflection on the human self and its place in the world.
4. To challenge students to critically examine their ethical responsibilities and choices in both local and global contexts.
5. To encourage purposeful public engagement and social responsibility.

Overlapping outcomes for each goal include: global interconnections and interdependencies, sustainability, cultural diversity, and multiple and evolving forms of civic identification and belonging (Otterbein College 2010).

First-Year Seminars
Hawai’i Pacific University has developed Global Learning First-Year Seminars that address both global learning and transition-to-college support (Hawai’i Pacific University 2010). Seminars are disciplinary based, but in addition to general student learning outcomes, faculty include two global learning outcomes as well. Defined global learning components include an integrative learning assignment as well as a Who Am I in the World? global citizenship essay. Students keep journals and participate in community and/or campus activities—students are expected to explore the global implications of these activities. A Global Citizenship Student Symposium is held each semester as well as a campus film series—both are linked to the first-year seminars.

First-year students at Worcester Polytechnic Institute (WPI) participate in a Great Problems Seminar in which they design, complete, and publicly share solution-based projects. The two-course introduction to university-level research and project work focuses on themes of current global importance, societal problems, and human needs. The three topics are Power the World (energy), Making Our World (engineering for sustainable development), and Heal the World (epidemics) (Worcester Polytechnic Institute 2009).

Learning Communities
Dickinson College models interdisciplinary global learning and connections across the curriculum through global clusters that build upon first year seminars. The Environmental Change and Human Decisions cluster, for example, combines a first-year seminar (focusing either on ethical frameworks for evaluating human decisions or examples of social conflict over how to sustain valued places) with Introduction to Environmental Science and Microeconomics. The Science and Sustainability cluster includes a first-year seminar that focuses on the formulation of public policy and the role scientific knowledge plays in competing social interests. Students then take Global Climate Change and History of Science (Dickinson 2010).

Writing Intensive Courses
Whittier College co-enrolls its first-year students in a writing seminar and a related course. In the past two years they have increased the number of these writing seminars that meet global learning criteria by 10%. Seminar titles include: Global Medicine and Chemistry, A World Without Us, and Peaceful Paths. This strategy for global learning, like most of the practices discussed here, is complicated by staffing issues. College writing at Whittier is taught across the curriculum, and the writing program is constantly recruiting new faculty to teach seminars. Developing global learning approaches within the seminars requires significant faculty development support. (Whittier College 2007).

In a related development, Marquette University is using a global learning framework to institute a quantitative reasoning across the curriculum effort. With support from the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE), the Who Counts? Math Across the Curriculum for Global Learning program works with faculty members to develop strategies for integrating mathematical reasoning across the curriculum to improve students’ abilities to solve global problems (Marquette University 2009).
Service Learning, Community-Based Learning

Curriculum for the Bioregion, a faculty and curriculum development initiative at the Washington Center, emphasizes local issues of sustainability and connects them to larger global learning outcomes. The “project is based on two ideas: local environmental knowledge is the basis for understanding the larger issues of global change, and within this framework of global change, experiential learning in local places has lasting meaning.” Consequently, faculty members and staff at Evergreen State College are encouraged to identify community partners to help provide students the tools they need “to assume personal and community responsibility for environmental stewardship wherever they live” (Washington Center 2010).

Capstone Courses and Projects
Drury University has a well-established general education program, Global Perspectives for the 21st Century (GP21) organized around global learning outcomes. After completing courses in Global Awareness, Cultural Diversity, Values Inquiry, and Science Inquiry, students enroll in a capstone course, Global Futures. The course is designed to introduce students to the scenarios for a sustainable global future and is divided into four sections: imagining the good future; exploring utopia and dystopia; envisioning our future on the basis of current realities; and imagining the good community. As with all capstone designs, coherence across the curriculum is critical and may not mesh with students selecting courses to meet general education distribution requirements from a wide array of choices. As a result, Drury faculty and administrators are developing prototypes of GP21 “pathways,” explicitly identified and linked courses that satisfy various requirements while engaging students in multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary exploration of a more focused global issue (Drury University 2010).

Study Abroad
In our experience working with colleges and universities, study abroad is the “default” topic that arises when we ask about global learning. And evidence shows, of course, that it is a high impact practice. When institutions begin to explore global learning as a much broader framework for curricular and co-curricular change, they begin to see study abroad as a more dynamic category as well. Colleges and universities continue to experiment with combining study abroad and service learning, study abroad and undergraduate research, study abroad as a first-year experience, study abroad as a required element of general education, and more. The common language of global student learning outcomes allows for greater alignment, collaboration, and accountability in what counts as high-impact study abroad. Additionally, institutions are experimenting with study away experiences that aim for similar student learning outcomes in the global context of domestic locations.
Global Learning: An Invitation for Collaboration

AAC&U has used the language of global learning because it resonates with the directions being set in liberal education described above. AAC&U member campuses have made student learning central to the educational process and have focused on global learning outcomes. They have seized the moment when stakeholders are more likely to appreciate the relevance of global contexts to critical thinking and social responsibility. They are meeting this challenge not by simply adding global content or global course requirements, but by rethinking the role of liberal learning in higher education. Global learning represents an opportunity to find allies and partners as the parameters of high impact educational experiences are rethought and experimentation is rewarded.

Big Questions

The key questions of the Shared Futures project—what does it mean to be a responsible citizen in today’s global context and how should one act in the face of large unsolved global problems?—are central questions for liberal education and powerful ways to organize curricular and cocurricular engagement. Every institution has its own version of the big questions.

Professional Learning Communities

Global learning is a significant professional development challenge. Many colleges and universities have found it valuable to organize learning communities for faculty and student affairs professionals to become more familiar with interdisciplinary global topics. AAC&U’s Shared Futures project organized discussion around the following topics: health and social justice; sustainability and interdependence; globalization, wealth, and poverty; the ethics of global citizenship; identity, culture and border crossings; and religion in global contexts. Learning community topics should be selected to fit institutional mission.

Shared Responsibility

Global learning cannot be achieved at one time or in one place and it must take into account the developmental stage of the student. Therefore, successful global learning must be built sequentially into the college experience. This shared responsibility represents an opportunity to widen the conversation and build partnerships across multiple campus units.

Shared Commitments

Global learning outcomes include questions of social justice, interconnections, power, and privilege. Attention to such issues makes global learning closely related to diversity work as well as civic engagement work. Consequently, global learning can represent common ground for educators from offices with overlapping agendas and responsibilities.

Assessment

High-impact learning is defined by evidence of its efficacy. Global learning is an amalgam of different practices; they each need careful assessment to track the multiple expectations of global learning and to help determine the best teaching strategies for each. Again, assessment can represent common ground for
educators from offices with overlapping agendas and responsibilities.

**Where Is Global?**

There are local/global intersections in every community. Colleges and universities can identify and utilize them and study abroad/away opportunities can be shaped accordingly. Local immigrant communities are a popular focus of local/global intersection. But remember, global trends and forces influence everyone—from the political refugee to the cattle rancher. Global learning is about recognizing the multiplicity of positions vis-à-vis those forces, not assuming that some are more global than others. Consequently, such local/global connections link the work of diversity or multicultural offices, community or civic engagement offices, and international education offices.

A capacious vision of globally focused liberal education has the potential to bridge many of the silos on our campuses. Many institutions are making global learning a signature component of liberal education and an example of high-impact/high-effort educational practice.
References


