

Internationalizing with Caution and Care

Several of my columns over the past year have focused on the values and benefits of internationalization of higher education and stressed the role that geographers could play in advancing internationalization on our campuses. Internationalization has been shown to promote the intercultural awareness of students, to better prepare them for the workforce, and, through the forging of collaborations across the globe, to enrich the quality of our research and scholarship. Geography's long standing disciplinary traditions of regional studies and field work are centrally relevant in the effort to internationalize higher education and give us a natural advantage to serve as leaders in this effort.

My comments this month are sparked by a concern that internationalization, instead of being seen as a serious move in rethinking our curriculum and institutional practices, may become regarded as just the latest "fad" in higher education. In such a situation, there is a tendency for universities to rush to get on the internationalization "bandwagon" and forget the core educational missions that internationalization is intended to promote. Rather than *internationalization*, we may in fact promote the *globalization* of higher education. In the latter case, higher education becomes just another commodity that is traded internationally, a model that is neither appropriate nor sustainable. It is critical, therefore, that our efforts to internationalize are taken with care and that we never lose sight of how they fit in the context of the mission and goals of our university and program.

A recent reminder of the need to move with caution comes from a report "Internationalization of Higher Education: New Directions, New Challenges" released by the International Association of Universities, a UNESCO-based organization, in October 2006. The report summarizes the results of a survey of university leaders in 95 countries. Whereas the vast majority viewed internationalization positively, citing the growth of international knowledge, intercultural understanding, and the strengthening of research capacity and production as the most important rationales, they also pointed to several inherent risks.

A frequently cited risk was the commercialization and commodification of education as a result of internationalization. Many university leaders, especially in the Asia-Pacific region were concerned about the rise in "degree mills" as increasing numbers of western universities seek to establish branch campuses in their regions. This is of particular concern since the governments of many countries, particularly the developing countries, have been slow in establishing accreditation systems to ensure the quality of national programs of higher education. Another concern, expressed in particular by university leaders in Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East, was the possible erosion of national/local cultural identity. Brain drain was yet another risk of internationalization that was identified by national leaders of education. These concerns underscored the clear tension between the views of higher education as a public good versus a tradable commodity.

Although much of what the IAU report covers is most relevant for university leaders and national governments, it does serve to remind us of the importance of moving with care and deliberation at all levels in our efforts at internationalization. Here are a few areas of caution for us as we move to internationalize our geography departments and programs.

First, the internationalization of the curriculum should in no way imply a de-emphasis of research and instruction on regional and local geographies of the United States. If anything, the trend toward internationalization gives a renewed importance to preserving indigenous knowledge and cultures. What it does imply, however, is that we begin to ask questions about the articulation of local economies, society, and cultures with the international arena.

Also important is that in our effort to cultivate international diversity on our campuses, we not forget our commitment to increase the numbers of students (and faculty) from underrepresented domestic groups,

particularly African Americans and Latinos. Having both sources of diversity is critical to the intellectual life in our departments and universities. We should advocate for sufficient resources to achieve the full spectrum of culture diversity and not permit substitution. A related responsibility we have is to orient our international students to the history of civil rights and race relations in the U.S. It is easy for international students, particularly those of color, to take for granted the reception accorded to them in the U.S. without necessarily recognizing the years of struggles for civil rights that have made this possible.

Finally, let's take care in designing our study abroad programs. The appropriate design and operation of a study abroad program is a topic beyond the scope of this

essay. Let me just emphasize here the importance of building programs outward from the core strengths of geography faculty and curricula rather than chasing what might be considered the trendy destination of the day. Assess the scholarly and regional strengths of your department and university, the composition of your students, and even the location of the campus. The most successful and sustainable international programs are those that are built on a foundation of prior interactions and programmatic strengths. Those that fail are often those that are set up in isolation from the broader direction of the department and university.

Ultimately, the internationalization of higher education is all about enhancing scholarly quality and excellence and widening the options for all students. Implemented without caution and care, internationalization can turn higher education into a globally traded commodity and can draw resources away from important local and national curricula and issues. Let us, as geographers, take the lead in our institutions to make sure we internationalize without losing sight of the core values of higher education. ■

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