

The Internationalization of Higher Education

Over the past few years the topic of internationalization of higher education has been sweeping the academy. In 2003, the American Council of Education released a report entitled *Mapping Internationalization on U.S. Campuses* that highlighted the current state of internationalization in undergraduate education and documented best practices. Beginning the same year, the Association of International Educators (NAFSA) began publishing an annual report titled *Internationalizing the Campus* which profiles colleges and universities that have demonstrated excellence in this area. Attention has also come from the federal government: in January 2006, the U.S. Departments of State and Education co-hosted a University Presidents Summit on International Education at the White House to draw attention to the importance of international education for the national interest.

Several factors have contributed to this surge of interest. There is a growing societal recognition that our graduates will compete in a global labor market and will need to develop the ability to work more effectively in international and multicultural settings. In the past few years, higher education itself has become globalized, with universities across the world competing for the best and brightest students. Countries like China and India that have long been "exporters" of students to the West are strengthening their educational systems, partnering in new ways with U.S. universities, and retaining a larger number of their own students. And of course there are the pedagogic advantages to having an internationally diverse student body. International students do not often fit neatly into the conservative vs. liberal categories into which many Americans divide themselves, and their perspectives allow for classroom debates that go beyond this well-worn dualism.

Geographers play an important role in these internationalization efforts. We have long taught courses on different

parts of the world, conducted fieldwork overseas, and engaged in research on topics such as climate change and globalization. Most would agree that geography is one of the foundational disciplines for an international education. Yet for us to be seen as leaders in the move towards campus internationalization, we need to engage in areas beyond the content of our subject matter alone. Specifically, we need to examine our academic and departmental practices and reflect on what they say about our commitment to internationalization. Let me cite three key areas and raise some questions that deserve our attention:

1. *Study Abroad.* This is perhaps the most recognized and accepted mechanism for internationalizing higher education. Study abroad programs, which provide American students direct experience in living, learning, and working in other countries, are key to the development of global competence. According to *Open Doors*, over 190,000 students in American universities participated in study abroad in 2003-04, an increase of 150% from a decade ago. To what extent are geography faculty and courses seen as major players in the growing popularity of study abroad programs? How many of our undergraduate majors participate in study abroad? What creative linkages are we building for our graduate students to study and research in international settings?

2. *Curriculum Integration.* Far too often, study abroad courses remain peripheral to a student's program of study in his or her major. Educators are increasingly stressing, therefore, the importance of embedding study abroad courses into the curriculum for the major. This curricular integration makes the resounding statement that international experiences are essential to developing a well-rounded graduate. To what extent do we regard study abroad— or other courses stressing global compe-

tence—as fundamental to a geography education? Can or should we restructure our curriculum to ensure that all students participate in a study abroad, exchange, or international service-learning programs?

3. *Campus Climate.* Institutions that are invested in internationalization often have a unique campus climate. International students are integrated into the life of the campus—as advisors, tutors, organizers of campus events, or volunteers. International festivals, food fairs, and colloquia are not regarded as "exotic" events intended only for international students, but "mainstream" activities that draw ethnically diverse participants. We need to ask, therefore, to what extent are geography's international students integrated into the

academic and social life of our departments? Are we creating an environment in which the perspectives and experiences they bring are regarded as a valuable resource (rather than, perhaps, a liability to be overcome)?

The internationalization of higher education is something that is here to stay, and geographers can and should play a central role in creating a campus culture that embraces this trend. Let's begin a discussion about ways we can engage and contribute. In the process we will enrich our own discipline and departments. I am eager to hear from those of you who have participated in internationalization efforts in your departments and campuses, and I look forward to sharing your insights and "best practices" in future columns. I close by thanking you for giving this former international student the opportunity and honor to serve you as AAG President in the coming year. ■

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