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The Complexities of Global Engagement

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Once upon a time, not long ago, till the end of the 20th century, most American colleges and universities either did not think about global engagement and internationalization or considered study abroad as the beginning and end of such involvement. Just two decades later, global engagement stands at the top of the agenda of many academic institutions, and the scope of internationalization on campuses has expanded dramatically. It is time to consider the scope and nature of global engagement.

Uwe Brandenburg and Hans de Wit (*International Higher Education,* Winter 2011) argued that globalization, with its assumptions of economic inequality and competition, has become the evil twin of internationalization, which they see as a positive force. They point out that most aspects of global engagement and internationalization have taken on competitive and often commercial elements, and that a careful reconsideration of strategies and purposes is required. A recent meeting of G8 (group of 8 major economies) higher education officials exhibited an interesting contrast between the national strategies of the Anglo-Saxon countries and those of continental Europe. The English-speaking countries increasingly see international higher education involvement as a commercial venture, while a German official claimed—"The goal we have is to win friends for Germany," through international education strategies.

In the era of complex 21st-century global engagement, many institutions are neglecting the traditional aspects of internationalization—providing a positive overseas experience for undergraduates, encouraging international faculty research, and ensuring that foreign students, postdocs, and visiting scholars have a positive experience and contribute to campus life. While it may seem old-fashioned to think about these elements, they are as important as ever—and remain at the

core of global engagement. While there is emphasis on increasing the numbers of domestic students going abroad, in some cases less attention is paid to the quality of that overseas experience. Similarly, visiting scholars are welcomed but often forgotten once they are on campus. To fulfill its promise and potential, global engagement must be a two-way street.

A Campus Foreign Policy

Global engagement encompasses a vast range of activities, which seldom add up to a coherent strategy on campus. While many universities have included internationalization as part of institutional strategy, few schools go beyond platitudes. Few define the nature of global engagement or internationalization, and few operationalize how broad goals might be achieved. Seldom is a budget or staffing linked to whatever goals may be expressed.

Academic institutions need a foreign policy. Such a policy needs to answer fundamental questions about motivations and means, aspirations and expectations. Most important, *why* is the university involved? What kinds of initiatives should be undertaken? What parts of the world should receive priority? Is the focus on research or teaching? Is the focus on faculty, graduate students, or undergraduates, and in what proportions? How are initiatives to be funded?

A foreign policy will identify specific parts of the world with which to engage, as no university can cover the entire globe. Choices may be guided by past involvement with particular countries, strong academic programs with specific international connections or aspirations, or external support (e.g., donors' priorities).

A foreign policy must be realistic. Is there campus expertise on a particular part of the world? Are there appropriate financial resources available? Is there sufficient support from targeted overseas partners? Are there appropriate personnel on campus to ensure the success of relevant initiatives?

A foreign policy is a strategic vision, not a detailed blueprint of specific activities and programs. It is intended to guide the parameters of engagement. For example, if the strategy emphasizes Asia, but a professor, or even a donor, wants to focus institutional attention on Africa, there will be a rationale for responding to proposals and making decisions. Likewise, if the foreign policy emphasizes institutional collaboration overseas, a free-standing, branch-campus initiative is unlikely to be desirable but at least can be evaluated with clear priorities in mind. The point is that a foreign policy will drive broad institutional policy.

The Advent of Commercialism

Despite a "free market" reputation in some quarters, few American colleges or universities have traditionally seen international activities in primarily commercial terms. A few large universities have long conducted money-earning international operations, and some small schools have relied on foreign students to fulfill enrollment targets. But most institutions have viewed global engagement in educational terms—when they have thought about it at all.

This is changing. At least one large American university system has emphasized the financial advantages of international activities, and many institutions are ramping up overseas enrollments, particularly from China. Links with for-profit providers of all kinds—to do recruiting overseas and to run "pathways" programs on campus for underprepared foreign undergraduates, among others—are increasingly common.

The commercialism on campus of international initiatives will inevitably create tensions between academic values and financial considerations. Will the institution cut corners to admit unqualified international students to fulfill enrollment targets? Will international students be provided with needed, and sometimes costly, support services? Will qualified domestic students be squeezed out to make room for high-fee paying international students? Will an international partnership be based principally on income-earning potential rather than on sound academic principles? All of these issues have, in fact, already been reported.

None of this is surprising in the age of state budget cuts and academic capitalism; but commercially focused global engagement is fraught with challenges—to the "brand name" among others—and may not succeed. The global image of American higher education may well change in the eyes of the international higher education community, as has happened to some extent to Australia.

Global Engagement and the Academic Community

All too often, campus international initiatives come from the top or from the interest of one or a small group of faculty. Effective global engagement requires a "buy in" and commitment from all relevant institutional stakeholders. Relevant constituencies must be fully engaged. The faculty is the key group, since they must inevitably implement any international strategy. Faculty approval is also necessary; strong opposition among vocal sections of the academic community can jeopardize initiatives. Without faculty commitment, most kinds of global engagement will either fail or will create unwanted controversy on campus.

A Commitment to the Long Haul

Often ignored in discussions of global engagement is the necessity of ensuring sustainability. Is there appropriate support on campus in terms of staff with relevant expertise? Is funding available—not just to launch a program, but to keep it going over time? Is faculty and student interest lasting? And does the foreign policy provide the effective framework for a global engagement effort that will stand the test of time?

Global engagement must be a central element of successful colleges and universities worldwide. The issues and strategies are, however, complex. Success requires a careful assessment of goals and depends on the specific realities of the institution and the academic community. A foreign policy brings together all parts of the campus community, in a coherent and realistic program. Good strategies, as with many other valuable products, do not grow on trees.