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Internationalizing Learning Communities at Liberal Arts Colleges

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These are heady, exhilarating, and disruptive times for international education. In the United States, the globalization of our lives, professions, and communities, and an instantaneous awareness of international events press upon public consciousness. Colleges and universities are embracing new forms of internationalization that expand far beyond past practice. Internationalization now spreads across all facets of our institutions and draws us outward into emerging systems of global higher education. Today, colleges and universities must not only graduate individuals who are at home in and prepared to lead a globalized world, they must also understand their own institutional place in this world, examine their own global impact, and consider (and then shape) higher education as a force for global good.

A Focus on Community

At liberal arts colleges, discussions of this new era for internationalization are centered on student learning. The most effective methods to educate students for a global future are also those that draw colleges—as institutions—into the broader world, as well. In the 21st century, robust learning requires knowledge to be constructed from global dialogue, collaboration, and mutual experience. The power of cross-national conversation to recast disciplinary assumptions and produce new insight is increasingly apparent. Thus, new globally developed understandings are needed, to guide increasingly globalized lives. Today, not just international learning but all learning requires serious conversation across national borders, tempered and tested by engagement, self-reflection, and critical analysis.

Generating these international conversations is not simply a matter

of sending more students to study abroad. A more systemic, institutional approach is required. One of the defining elements of liberal arts colleges could be invaluable in this regard—providing a laboratory for developing cross-national wisdom, which reverberates far beyond these colleges themselves. First, however, this element must be reworked for a globalized world.

The pedagogical core of liberal arts colleges is their emphasis on close-knit, campus-based, and immersive learning communities, which bring students and faculty together for sustained collaborative exploration. Such communities constitute a powerful pedagogy, for which liberal arts institutions are justly praised. Students and faculty interact both in and out of the classroom; campus life fosters conversations that continue over weeks, even years. Living is linked inextricably to learning. In these intellectual incubators, ongoing dialogue creates new knowledge and transforms thinking, while phases of personal development are intertwined with those of academic advancement.

This emphasis on residentially based learning communities has long shaped the kind of international engagement attempted by American liberal arts colleges. Faculty with international research agendas occasionally brought these into the classroom; some international students (usually 1 to 2 percent of total enrollment) studied on campus; and some other students (less than 25 percent on average) studied abroad, generally in the junior year, and—except for a few disciplines—with little connection to the conversations occurring on campus. For most students, the learning communities so critical to their growth and development were overwhelmingly mononational in composition.

The key issue now is how to refashion this model for a century that demands global dialogue and collaboration. Phrased another way, how can we build internationally constituted communities of learning and communities that preserve core elements of the residential model, but transfer these to more fluid, sometimes nonresidential, formats? For liberal arts colleges, global engagement means extending outward in ways that bring more international voices into the conversations that shape student learning, build disciplinary knowledge, and carry out institutional mission. How can more diverse communities be created, in which individuals from multiple nations come together to think in new ways, enlighten each other, advance human knowledge, and prepare themselves to make an impact in an increasingly globalized world? The answers are varied, and the actions they stimulate can occur both on and off campus.

Strategies for Global Engagement

In the 21st century, students should graduate with the knowledge, skills, and experience to pursue their lives and careers internationally—best done through dialogue and collaboration and a network of international colleagues, with whom they are already in conversation. For this to occur, institutions must operate as deeply linked nodes in global networks of like-minded institutions, and multiple platforms must be constructed, on which students, faculty, and staff participate in multinational networks of action and discovery. What follows are four strategies for realizing this vision of globally engaged liberal arts colleges.

Develop a robust partnership program. The program should be developed with colleges, universities, and organizations located abroad and/or engaged in international work. The number of partners need not to be large. The goal is quality, not quantity. Partnerships should be cultivated to create common experiences that enhance the work of students, faculty, staff, and the participating institutions themselves. Some alliances will reflect institutional strengths and needs; others will tap the disciplinary diasporas in which particular faculty participate. Partnerships should be constructed to move beyond the transactional exchange of students toward more transformational collaborations that foster sustained conversation, deepened understanding, and expanded activities over time. This requires attention to relationship building, mutual benefit, open communications, shared decision making, resolving differences, confronting inequalities, flexibility, adaptability, and institutional support for partnership activities. Developed in this manner, partnerships can generate geographically dispersed, but intellectually focused, learning communities, which anchor and catalyze other international initiatives, including collaborative online teaching, curricular coordination (such as joint courses, degrees, and certificates), mutually developed conferences, research endeavors, and social action projects.

Meaningfully engage faculty. Constructing internationally engaged learning communities requires the active participation of faculty, in opening their courses to international dialogue and collaboration. This, in turn, requires institutional support for faculty development—ranging from grants for exploratory travel to the creation of multiple venues (both face-to-face and virtual) for conversation and relationship building, with international or internationally minded colleagues. Curricular partnerships must flow from faculty teaching interests and research agendas, and these can come from any discipline. Shakespeare can be read globally, discussions of environmental sustainability gain from global perspectives, and science labs benefit from attention to issues of intercultural teamwork. New knowledge can be created by

opening individual class sessions to dialogue with international colleagues; and entire courses or degree programs can be codesigned and cotaught using online, distance means. Clusters of courses, representing different disciplines, but focused on a common theme, can enable on-campus faculty to share their international expertise with those new to such work.

Insure a vibrant, deeply international community of students. Relatively few liberal arts colleges host significant populations of international students, but it may be time to increase the participation more widely through revamped recruitment, admissions, and financial aid processes; and increased attention to making campus classrooms sites of international engagement. Some colleges approach this goal by developing robust exchange programs, with selected international partners—thereby insuring that significant numbers travel back and forth, connecting institutions as well as individuals and building an ever-deepening understanding of each other’s countries. Others are opening up “reverse” study-abroad options that welcome international students to their campuses for an academic year or semester. Another variant is the development of multinational study-abroad programs, where faculty and students from several institutions gather in a common location (sometimes apart from any of their home campuses)—to launch an international dialogue around a particular topic. In a related vein, it is equally important to ensure that more US students study abroad and that they have direct engagement with local communities when they do so. This calls for a wider range of overseas possibilities, including internships, service projects, short-term study trips, and international research—some directed at STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) and other fields where scholarship is internationally collaborative, but undergraduate education rarely is.

Define a global role for the institution. A final recommendation is that liberal arts colleges, as institutions, engage in mission-related global conversations and projects. It is important that students and faculty—as individuals—be internationally engaged. It is equally essential that liberal arts colleges—as institutions—be thus engaged. By understanding themselves as active agents in the broader world, defining their international footprint, and connecting international engagement to key aspects of institutional mission, colleges can model the kind of international awareness and citizenship they ask of their students. For example, our own institution, Bryn Mawr College, engages with key partners around the world on issues of women’s advancement and empowerment, which have animated our college since its inception. Our core mission is now explicitly understood to be a global (and glob-

ally collaborative) project. While small liberal arts colleges cannot mount the large global development projects of big universities, they can use their convening power, raise their voices, model new approaches, and generate significant insight on major issues, powered by the intensive, reflexive dialogues of learning that are their distinctive strength and hallmark.

Ultimately, the kinds of global engagement described here will transform liberal arts colleges themselves. Students are expected to come back changed from their time abroad. If colleges construct their communities of learning more internationally, they, too, will be changed. Courses will evolve, faculty will see their disciplines in new ways, and unanticipated initiatives will spring forward—all as a result of broadening who sits at the table. Moreover, what is learned about sustaining meaningful international dialogue and engagement can give liberal arts institutions a significant role to play in shaping the emerging global system of higher education and generating new, collaboratively derived insights on critical global issues.