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Internationalization: Achieving the Next Level

Internationalization is not just a trendy higher education catchword, something we attend to because our university administrators think it is important. Globalization is a fact of life in the 21st century. The question is not whether the university should or will become more internationalized. This is already happening. Instead we need to ask whether we effectively educate our students to thrive in and contribute to an ever more globalized society and economy. Whether they find careers in business, engineering, the high tech industry, mining, social work, tourism, health sciences, education, or government, University of Utah graduates will encounter the world through immigrants, trade, research collaboration, travel, and foreign investment, all of which profoundly shape the lives of people in this state, in countless direct and indirect ways.

In its “National Action Agenda for Internationalizing Higher Education,” published in 2007, The National Association of State Universities and Land Grant Colleges (NASULGC) articulates the obvious, stating “Globally engaged universities are critical to maintaining America’s place as a world leader and ensuring its national security. America’s colleges and universities must prepare graduates to be active participants in a world in which national boundaries are increasingly permeable. Information, capital, products, labor and individuals cross national borders with ever increasing frequency and speed. America’s need to remain competitive in the world requires its educational institutions produce globally competent human capital and cutting-edge research.”

Central to the goals laid out by the NASULGC is the idea of “global competence,” which means at its fullest being knowledgeable about diverse countries and cultures and sensitive to cultural differences, having experience living and working in other countries, incorporating foreign perspectives into one’s work, and interacting effectively with people from other countries and cultures.

The University of Utah has met many of the specific goals set out by the NASULGC as benchmarks of internationalization. As an institution, we have incorporated internationalization into our strategic vision and mission. Our administration, led by President Michael Young, has strongly supported the goals of internationalization. We have a highly effective International Center that assists students wishing to study abroad and supports large numbers of foreign students and faculty visiting here. The new International Requirement is inspiring the integration of international perspectives into curriculum across the campus, including the sciences and other fields long disconnected from traditionally defined foreign area studies. A large proportion of our faculty engages in research abroad or international collaborations and incorporates global themes into their teaching on a regular basis.

When it comes to student outcomes, we still have a ways to go. As a result of our many efforts to globalize education at this university, no student can graduate from the University of Utah

without being exposed to some kind of global perspective. But having achieved this minimal benchmark, we now need to move to the next level. The NASULGC defines the globally competent university graduate as having not only “a diverse and knowledgeable worldview,” but also understanding of the international dimensions of their field of study, ability to communicate effectively in another language, cross-cultural sensitivity and adaptability, and experiences outside the U.S. In concrete terms, these goals require that extensive foreign language study and study abroad be incorporated much more broadly into undergraduate curriculum.

A relatively large number (the precise numbers are not tabulated) of our students come to the university with significant language and overseas experience gained through an LDS mission, which usually means that they have achieved third year level proficiency in a language other than English. While these students have a uniquely strong foundation for the establishment of global competence, they are not yet fluent enough to use their language in professional settings, nor have they learned about the global dimensions of their chosen fields. Moreover, they are not a majority of our students. Currently less than one third of our graduates, those who attain a B.A. degree, are required to demonstrate a minimal second-year proficiency in a second language. Over two-thirds of our students graduate with a B.S. degree that carries no language requirement. Ironically, although most of these B.S. students are going into the most globalized of fields like business and engineering, the vast majority does not have the language skills, knowledge of foreign practices in their discipline, and familiarity with foreign-based workplace methods to function with ease in a foreign professional context.

In contrast, according to a European Union Survey in 2005, half of European citizens speak a second language, while nearly eight out of ten students—ages 15- 24—can have a normal conversation in at least one foreign language. In most of Europe, as well as Korea, China, Japan, and many Latin American countries, second language learning is mandated from elementary school on.

Yet another dimension of the challenges to graduating globally competent students is that far too few of those students who do take foreign language courses study the strategic languages of Asia and the Middle East despite the tremendous and increasing economical and political importance of these regions. As the journal of the Columbia Teachers College notes, “Like the American automobile industry that failed to demonstrate prescience by investing in trucks and minivans instead of hybrids and electric vehicles, the inability of public schools and chief local, state, and national administrators to prepare the next generation for a world where Americans can no longer rely on fluently speaking one language is an active land mine in the field of education.” (The Columbia Spectator, 10/27/08)

Professional proficiency in foreign languages and cultures is not a luxury of liberal education, but is a vital practical skill set that is widely recognized to be essential for jobs in business, government, and technical fields. Recent federal reports cite a language and cultural skill shortage in more than 70 agencies critical to national security, public diplomacy and economic competitiveness. In his keynote speech to the International Engineering Colloquium in 2005 titled “Engineering the Future: Staying Competitive in the Global Economy,” Paul Camuti, President and CEO of Siemens, stated that engineers in the 21st century must be able to

communicate in multiple languages and have the ability to work in cross-cultural teams. Vice-President of UPS International Human Resources, John Valeri, in his keynote to the CIBER Business Language Conference in 2006, said, “If I were a university student today, and I knew what I know now, I’d make a commitment to personal development in three key areas: . . . cultural awareness, languages, technology. Being culturally adroit requires experience, finesse, and the ability to nuance delicate, local subtleties. . . . But if there is a fast track, it’s likely through my second area of personal development – language skills. To really earn the necessary level of trust, you have to get beyond the rudimentary levels of language. In general, people who possess these language skills can earn up to 20% more than those who do not.”

Having already established a solid foundation for internationalizing education at the University of Utah, we have the opportunity to join the vanguard of institutions in this country producing large numbers of globally competent graduates, not just in foreign language and area studies majors, but in professional and technical fields. Two concrete steps would move our curriculum to a higher and exemplary level of internationalization. First, we could establish of a universal language requirement for all of our students. And second, we can significantly expand the numbers of students who have a meaningful experience abroad before they graduate by integrating study or internship abroad more closely into our existing majors. This can be done by advising students earlier and more forcefully about such opportunities, facilitating credit transfers, and developing more specialized international programs that focus on skills specific to different majors.

These two goals are quite accessible. We already teach some fifteen languages on this campus, most up to advanced levels. We have a wide variety of study abroad programs and internships available to our students, many of which allow students to take courses required for majors in business, engineering, and social sciences, in addition to language study. With the start of the new ASUU study abroad fund and numerous new federal and private scholarships, there is more funding available to assist with study abroad than ever before, funding that remains largely untapped by our students. Internationalization is happening with or without our conscious participation and a 21st century education must prepare students for it.