

Teaching Worldliness to a New Generation

“THE MORE WE KNOW ABOUT EACH OTHER, the more we learn about each other, the more we engage in our differences that we have between our societies and between our social systems and between our political points of view, the better off we are. The more dialogue we have at every level and especially at the academic level, where opinion-makers are located . . . the better off we are.”

The words are those of Colin Powell, then U.S. secretary of state, as he looked ahead to the celebration of International Education Week in 2004. “The more we . . . understand each other,” he said, “the more effective we will be in creating a world of global citizens, and the better our chances of achieving peace in our increasingly interdependent world.”

Powell, as a career military officer and an experienced designer and practitioner of foreign policy, understood then what many other officials still seem unable to accept today: that the United States as a whole, and its citizens as individuals, cannot possibly make their way in the world without greater knowledge and understanding of other people—their histories, their perspectives, their hopes and dreams for the future.

It is not that Powell is unfamiliar with the exceptionalist and triumphalist points of view that have so long infused the education of young people in this country and, as a result, distorted the public dialogue over international issues; it is just that he understands how anachronistic and unworkable these attitudes have become.

It seems a simple point: the American people must recognize that the unique circumstances in which they found themselves after World War II, reinforced by the U.S. “victory” over communism in the Cold War a generation later, are gone and unlikely ever to return. Hard as it may be to accept, being “the world’s only superpower” does not give the United States the right, or indeed the opportunity, to call the shots in every corner of that world. A superpower is not necessarily called upon to supervise. On the contrary, getting along in a more complicated environment and competing effectively on an international level will require a whole new attitude, one component of which will be good old-fashioned humility.

Learning to Understand Others Better

Getting this straight will be a multifaceted project, lasting decades and requiring the best efforts of statesmen, politicians, public intellectuals, opinion leaders, and teachers at every level. We simply must learn to understand others better, even as we seek to improve their impressions of us through contact with a broader range of Americans.

There is a shortcut available: study abroad. Even despite recent increases, the Institute of International Education (IIE) estimates that barely 1 percent of U.S. students are overseas at any given time—a shameful



record, far below that of other countries. According to 2004 figures from IIE, the comparable figure for Canada is 3.3 percent, for Greece 8.8 percent, Ireland 9.7 percent, and Kenya 13 percent. An estimated 40 percent of the highest-achieving students in China are believed to study abroad at some point during their education.

Nothing helps people—all people, but especially young people—understand the complexities of daily life on this planet better than an international experience, even a brief one. It is estimated that only 27 percent of the American public have passports today. If we can increase that number exponentially and quickly, particularly among college students, it could make a major difference in the American prospect.

At Goucher College, where we now require study abroad for all undergraduates who have enrolled since the fall of 2006, we have found that even a brief sojourn outside the United States has a dramatic impact on a student's way of thinking. Those who take advantage of the opportunity early on often decide to pursue a second or subsequent overseas course of study. Indeed, I have yet to meet a student who regrets spending time in other cultures.

Upon return, these students invariably explain the benefits of their education abroad better than we, as faculty or administrators, could ever do ourselves: they speak of a "transforming experience," "a life-changing opportunity," or nothing less than "an enlightenment." Rather than wondering

when other countries will come around to the American way of organizing life, they typically see that other societies actually may have something valuable to teach us about how to handle shared everyday problems, such as urban transportation, literacy, immunizations and other public health issues, and the care of older generations. ("Family values," to some people's surprise, may have a substantive meaning outside U.S. politics.) This phenomenon is especially pronounced when students travel to non-traditional destinations outside Western Europe.

One of the most interesting conversations to eavesdrop on, I have found, is among students who have returned from various destinations, comparing notes and sharing with each other the insights they have

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brought back. All of this is bound to have a long-term impact as these more experienced and worldly young people inherit positions of responsibility in their own chosen fields.

Not a Luxury Item

Perhaps the most offensive argument I have heard against a study-abroad requirement is that while it is perfectly acceptable for children from a privileged background, it is a “luxury” that members of underrepresented groups, who are struggling to obtain their education, can ill afford. The implication is that disadvantaged students must first somehow catch up with their peers, before they can reap the full benefit of an overseas experience.

In fact, some have observed that the reverse is true: that students from more diverse backgrounds, including those from recent immigrant families—who are perhaps less convinced of the flawless nature of American society and governmental structures—may be quicker than the majority to appreciate what they discover and learn overseas. What is more, if they have never had the privilege of their own personal bathroom, car, and computer, their adaptation to everyday life in another country may be considerably less traumatic than that of more spoiled American students.

To be sure, there are certain complications that must be taken into account when an institution is trying to increase the number of its students going abroad.

One frequently voiced concern is that a traditional semester or year abroad can be disruptive to the academic progress of the most focused students, such as those who are following a pre-medical curriculum, and to the lives of others with an ambitious extracurricular agenda, including members of varsity athletic teams.

Many Goucher students in both categories have found that with sufficient advance planning, they can manage a carefully selected semester- or year-long program. But some cannot, or choose not to do so, and that is why it is important to offer other options for international exposure, such as the short-term three-week intensive courses

that Goucher and many other institutions have developed and popularized in January, May-June, or during the summer.

Whether studying marine biology in Honduras, Central European history and literature in the Czech Republic, politics and the arts in Ghana, or cultural complexities in India or China—or, indeed, a foreign language in a country where it is spoken—American students may reap great benefits from such a brief program. Although the experience will obviously not be as intense or complete as a semester-long one, it nonetheless will have a significant impact on someone who has spent his or her prior life entirely within the United States.

Balancing Enrollment and Financial Concerns

Another natural concern is with the ability of administrators to plan for enrollment and housing needs when a substantial number of students do study abroad for a semester or a year. There is no immediate panacea for this problem, but careful thinking should help to deal with it. Students can be required, for example, to declare a major before making plans to go overseas for an extended period of time, and they can be routinely asked to estimate and update their study-abroad intentions each time they register for classes.

Middlebury College, which has traditionally had a large number of students spending semesters abroad, in part because of its emphasis on language study, introduced a program more than 30 years ago that has a percentage of each year’s freshman class delay the start of its studies until the spring semester. Originally launched in order to fill classroom seats and beds vacated by those going abroad in February, it has evolved to the point where some entering students ask to delay their start by a semester and the college actively seeks out students who might fit the profile of the purportedly more independent “Febs.”

Other pioneering liberal arts colleges around the country have found their own special ways to promote and deliver study-

abroad programs. Dickinson College, in Pennsylvania, has specialized in programs in cities not overcrowded with others’ students. Kalamazoo College, in Michigan, has long sponsored 50 different programs on six continents. And Colby College, in Maine, sends 70 percent of its students abroad; since 1982, that has included many first-year and even first-semester students.

Admittedly, there are also broad financial implications to be considered. Overseas study can be expensive, especially in a period when the dollar is so weak. At Goucher, we are giving every student a \$1,200 voucher to defray the expenses of his or her first study-abroad experience (and a \$3,000 one to those in our unique and highly selective International Scholars Program); but some students—for example, those who depend on part-time jobs to help pay for their education, but cannot expect to work while overseas—will obviously need more assistance.

The solicitation of dedicated scholarship funds by individual colleges and universities is one option, but federal funding will be necessary if international education is to be taken seriously as a national priority, as Congress has indicated should be the case. One pending piece of legislation, the Paul Simon Study Abroad Foundation Act, would authorize the expenditure of \$80 million a year to distribute federal grants to students through educational institutions and other study-abroad providers.

With the concerted encouragement of the higher education community, the next national administration may well find it necessary to pay more attention to, and spend much more money on, this critical priority. In our era, citizenship is global, and so is knowledge. It is important that we all work together to bring young Americans up to speed. **IE**

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