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The New Buzzword in Student Affairs

Wendy Williamson

Internationalization: The New Buzzword in Student Affairs speaks to the importance of international education in an interdependent world. It covers preparation for scholars, including a variety of professional development opportunities. This article also addresses intercultural learning opportunities for students in the US and abroad.

“Internationalism” and “internationalization” are buzzwords today, not because of some political scheme, not because of some unseen national agenda, but because the world is today very different than it has been throughout history. The ease of electronic international communication, the affordability of intercontinental transportation, and the collapse of trade and investment barriers in many nations have spewed national products and services into global markets. Higher education is no exception; formerly a national product/service accessible only to the financially able, it is now accessible to anyone, anywhere in the world. In the 2000/2001 academic year, 547,867 international students studied in the United States, an increase of 6.4% over the prior year (Koh, 2001). In the 1999/2000 academic year, 143,590 U.S. students studied abroad, an increase of 11% over the prior year and 61% over the past five years (Koh). This data is updated on a yearly basis and can be accessed via the World Wide Web at <http://www.opendoorsweb.org>.

With good reason, higher education is working towards internationalizing its entire makeup, including its organizational structure, leadership, curriculum, programs, students, and educators (De Wit, 2002). According to De Wit, the internationalization of higher education is the process by which an institution integrates an international and intercultural dimension into its teaching, research, and service functions. As the mother of higher education, student affairs and services are at the forefront of this multifaceted process to increase understanding and appreciation for human differences in students (Ping, 1999). Professionals in all different areas of student affairs are recognizing the need to facilitate the development of international knowledge and skills in students and prepare them for life in an interdependent world.

Preparation for Scholars and Practitioners

In order for scholars and practitioners to effectively educate students, they should strive to develop intercultural competence in themselves (Ebbers & Henry, 1990; Paige, 1996). Individuals who are interculturally competent are aware of and knowledgeable about various attitudes, beliefs, values, religions, hierarchies, meanings, experiences, material objects, notions of time, relations of space, concepts of the universe, etcetera (Samovar & Porter, 1991). They have the ability to function in multicultural, national, and international settings and have the motivation to continually develop cultural identities tantamount to the term “globalism” (Diaz, Massialas, & Xanthopoulos, 1999).

Developing intercultural competence requires commitment and can take place in a variety of ways. Student affairs scholars and practitioners can seek to understand the international connections of their institutions and regions (Latham & Dalton, 1999). They can use their institution’s international programs to visit foreign countries, invite international colleagues to their institutions, and sponsor joint teaching and research projects with world-wide partners (Kruger & Dungy, 1999; Latham & Dalton). They can also spend professional development time taking culture-related courses, learning foreign languages, working with international student organizations, collaborating with international student offices on projects and programs, assisting with health and safety issues in study abroad programs, and participating in international orientations and events. Involvement can also occur through international groups such as the Association of International Educators (commonly known as NAFSA) and the International Association of Student Affairs and Services (IASAS).

NAFSA is the leading professional association in the field of international education. It promotes the exchange of educators and students to and from the United States, in an attempt to further the cross-cultural

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understanding and knowledge pertinent to effective U.S. leadership, security, and competitiveness. Members believe that such exchanges advance leadership and scholarship in a global community and that internationalization is education for an interdependent world. While this organization is U.S. based, it hosts a national conference every May that members from all over the world attend.

IASAS is an international community of higher education and student affairs professionals working together to organize an international community of student affairs and services professionals. IASAS has already collaborated with the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), and various student non-governmental organizations (NGOs) affiliated with UNESCO, to develop a manual representing the cross-cultural principles and values of student affairs and services around the world (Ludeman, 2002). This manual covers literally every area of student affairs from the senior student affairs office to women's services to developmental learning centers and can be accessed on the International Education Community section of the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) Web site at <http://www.naspa.org/communities/kc/community.cfm?kcid=8>.

Some of the most renowned international opportunities for student affairs scholars and practitioners are the Fulbright Scholar Program, sponsored by the U.S. Department of State; the International Exchange Program, sponsored by NASPA; and the International Faculty Development Seminars, sponsored by the Council on International Educational Exchange (CIEE). The Fulbright Scholar Program is long-term, up to 12 months, and usually involves study tours, teaching and/or research and requires an advanced degree. Fulbright is an excellent opportunity for student affairs staff, doctoral candidates, and faculty. On the other hand, the NASPA exchanges and the CIEE development seminars are more realistic for professionals with commitments at work and home because they don't last longer than a vacation would last. The NASPA exchanges are specifically designed to familiarize practitioners with how student affairs work is conducted in other countries. CIEE's development seminars are intensive short-term experiences designed to stimulate campus initiatives towards internationalization. CIEE also sponsors many work, travel, and volunteer initiatives for U.S. citizens and study abroad programs for high school and college students.

Education for Students

With some preparation on the road to developing cultural competence, scholars and practitioners can begin to educate students for an interdependent world. Countries are becoming more integrated and dependent on each other: international understanding and leadership appears to be one of the most important skill sets graduates will need to move the world forward in peace and prosperity (Bush, 2001; Clinton, 2000; Paige, 2001; Riley, 2001).

While peace comes by way of mutual understanding and cooperation (Bush, 2001), conflict is often the result of misunderstandings between people. A prime example is what has happened in the United States since September 11, 2001. Everyday people, judged to be of Arab decent or Muslim, are stereotyped and targeted for harassment and violence. Although terrorists and fanatics committed the attacks, some people took the attacks to be fostered by the Arab world's hatred towards the West. This kind of generalizing of the Arab world comes from a lack of cultural understanding and perpetuates the ongoing problems of racism, harassment, and violence. While international education is certainly short of a panacea, it can help to alleviate cultural misunderstandings; reveal stereotyping, racism, and hate crimes; and create leaders who value cultural diversity and foster an environment of tolerance. In fact, educators and politicians seem to agree that international education is equally, if not more, important now than it was before the terrorist attacks of September 11 (Alliance for International Educational and Cultural Exchange, 2001; Bush; Koh, 2001; Paige, 2001). International education, an understanding of other cultures, is really the key to the evolution of peace across nations.

The U.S. government, in particular, has and continues to acclaim the importance of international education to leadership. The Fulbright Program (1946), the Peace Corps (1961), the National Security Education Act (1991), and International Education Week (2000) were established to increase mutual understanding between the people of foreign countries and the people of the United States, to strengthen the viability of the U.S. economy in a global marketplace, and to enhance international security and cooperation through leadership. In fact, every president since 1954 has had something positive to say about foreign exchanges and international

education programs (NAFSA: Association of International Educators, 2001). In observance of International Education Week 2001, President George W. Bush said, "The relationships that are formed between individuals from different countries, as part of international education programs and exchanges, can . . . foster goodwill that develops into vibrant, mutually beneficial partnerships among nations." International understanding comes by way of communication, and communication is built with trust, unity, and peace between nations (Bush, 2001).

While there are many ways of developing international leadership skills in students, foreign exchange and study abroad programs are two of the most effective. Moreover, barriers are falling down. Like higher education, it used to be that international programs were expensive, allowing access only to the wealthy. However, capitalism has since come into the equation, and opened more affordable options. It is possible nowadays for students to study abroad for less than it would cost to live and study at their home institution. Now, students can get major, minor, and general education credit for international programs; use all of their federal financial aid; find grants and scholarships for understudied languages and cultures; go anywhere in the world; and be of any major or minor. Because of the recognized value that international education has for students, the doors have been opened.

Consequently, more and more of exchange and study abroad programs are being offered as experiential education components at colleges and universities around the country. First advocated by John Dewey in the early twentieth century, experiential education is learning through personal experience (Smith, Roland, Havens, & Hoyt, 1992). Students develop international leadership skills by studying or working abroad and exposing themselves directly to foreign cultures. Through this exposure, many develop an enhanced understanding and appreciation of other people or cultures or ways of knowing and learn how to constructively manage cultural differences. In addition, students acquire other leadership skills such as maturity, communication, flexibility, adaptability, ingenuity, independence, and eagerness to thrive in new and/or challenging environments.

Similar learning can occur while in the United States through intentional and structured activities. Colleges and universities with an international student presence have a ready-made forum for this type of learning. Orientations and other programs that pair international and U.S. students have proven to be successful to help international students adjust to American culture (Abe, Geelhoed, & Talbot, 1998) and give U.S. students opportunities to learn about other cultures and countries in the world. Challenge education activities (such as ropes courses) place culturally and nationally diverse students in situations where they must rely on each other to complete challenges. This type of education offers not only the opportunity to learn about each other's cultural norms and values, but also how to interrelate diplomatically.

Other ways of facilitating the development of international leadership skills in students include scholarship. Aware that the United States is becoming more integrated with the world, educators from all different fields have called for the internationalization of scholarship (Johnston, 1998). Scholarship is made up of discovery, integration, application, and teaching (Boyer, 1990), and this undertaking requires a multifaceted approach. With respect to student affairs, it requires scholars and practitioners alike to think about developing new theories, techniques, applications, and models that are relevant in today's global society. The more that student affairs scholars and practitioners can develop intercultural competence within themselves and make international connections, the closer the field will come to conceptualizing scholarship for a global society.

There are many ways that student affairs practitioners and scholars can work together to develop new globalized scholarship. Higher education is in need of theories, applications, and models that (a) recruit and retain multicultural students and faculty from around the world; (b) teach students about diversity, multicultural, and international issues; (c) provide students with the knowledge and skills necessary to live and work with people and cultures different from themselves; (d) train students and educators how to manage cultural differences in their personal and professional lives; (e) internationalize the curriculum in higher education departments and programs; (f) modify campus culture to increase inter-group harmony and decrease conflict; (g) exhibit how higher education institutions can function effectively across national boundaries; and (h) promote social change to reduce various forms of inequality and discrimination (Paige, 1996). These theories, applications, and models, as well as others, will contribute directly and indirectly to the development of international leadership and intercultural citizenship in students.

When developing scholarship for a global society, it is impossible to incorporate all cultures; it is possible, however, to recognize the cultural limitations of a theory or model and not mistake it for universal reality. Some cultures put individuals before groups, and value self-efficacy, autonomy, and responsibility, while other cultures put groups before individuals, and value harmony, collaboration, and interdependence (McGoldrick, Pearce & Giordino, 1996; Ting-Toomey, 1999). With this in mind, it would be inappropriate to assume that all students would buy in to a theory with a sole objective of self-efficiency and/or autonomy. Theories should be created, adapted, and/or changed to be inclusive of worldviews that are different from our own.

Conclusion

Student affairs practitioners and scholars can no longer afford to define themselves and/or their institutions primarily by local missions (Dalton, 1999). “The global interconnectedness of economics, politics, communications, and travel make it necessary for student affairs leaders, even at the local level, to be ‘international minded,’ if they are to be effective institutional leaders” (Dalton, p. 7).

Preparing students to lead and serve in a global community is more than an ideal; it is an ethical obligation for all educators. While the objective of student affairs used to be how to facilitate the development of students into responsible leaders and citizens, now it is how to facilitate the development of students from all cultures in a global society. Intercultural competence is the first step in meeting this challenge of internationalizing our work, our students, our institutions, and ultimately our nation.

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