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COMMENTARY

'Global Competency' Is Imperative for Global Success

By *FERNANDO REIMERS* | JANUARY 30, 2009

The recent terrorist attacks in Mumbai raise four questions for those of us who work in higher education.

First, in what ways did the education of the perpetrators bring them to take the lives of hundreds of unarmed civilians not engaged in combat? Second, how were the many people who enabled those perpetrators educated — those who turned a blind eye or supported the terrorists during the many years when their intolerant views developed and as they trained and planned their attacks? Third, the responses of ordinary citizens to the attacks, both in India and in Pakistan, appear to constrain the options for their governments' leaders to pursue negotiated avenues of cooperation, thus increasing the risk of military conflict and political instability in the region. In what ways did the teachings of history and geography in India and Pakistan shape such prejudiced and xenophobic views of their neighbors?

Finally, and most important, to what extent has the education of people around the world prepared them to understand the sources of such terrorist attacks and their potential consequences — and to think about the best courses of action to deal with them?

The answers to the first three questions require — and should receive — further study. But the answer to the last question is clear: Schools and colleges around the world are not adequately preparing their students and other citizens to understand the nature of shared planetary challenges like international terrorism, regional and global conflicts, and global warming.

According to a recent report of scenarios prepared by the National Intelligence Council, the next 15 years will bring significant global changes, including the transformation of the international political system built after World War II, an unprecedented transfer of wealth from the West to the East, enormous pressure on natural resources resulting from continuing economic growth, and increased potential for global conflict, particularly in the Middle East. Given the growing interdependence among nations as a result of trade, increased communications, and migratory flows, it will be crucial for people to develop the skills to understand and help resolve such urgent challenges.

Today those skills are necessary for most of the world's population, not just a few people. Since the end of World War II in the United States, political leaders have agreed that college programs that educate a cadre of experts in foreign languages and area studies should be supported to serve the perceived needs of national security, and more recently, provide a competitive advantage for American businesses. But at the request of Congress, the National Research Council recently evaluated those programs and concluded, in *International Education and Foreign Languages: Keys to Securing America's Future* (2007), that they should be redesigned to serve a broader segment of the college population — not just a few specialists. Recent studies of the American Council on Education have also documented that very few higher-education institutions demonstrate a significant level of internationalization.

Students need "global competency" — the knowledge and skills that help them cross disciplinary domains to comprehend global events and respond to them effectively. Global competency has three interdependent dimensions. The first is a positive approach toward cultural differences and a willingness to engage those differences. That requires empathy with people with other cultural identities, an interest and understanding of various civilizations and their histories, and the ability to see those differences as opportunities for constructive, respectful, and peaceful transactions. That ethical dimension of global competency also includes a commitment to basic equality and the rights of all persons — and a disposition to act to uphold those rights.

The second dimension of global competency is the ability to speak, understand, and think in several foreign languages.

The third dimension involves broad and deep knowledge of world history, geography, and the global aspects of health care, climate change, economics, politics, international relations, and other issues. It also requires an understanding of the process of globalization itself and a capacity to think critically and creatively about complex international challenges, such as the Israeli incursion in Gaza, its antecedents, and its aftermath.

Colleges are particularly well situated to contribute to the three key dimensions of global education. They can do that for their students by placing those objectives squarely in the middle of their mission. A recent report of the Committee for Economic Development shows that less than 1 percent of American college students study Arabic or other "critical languages" that are vital to national security, and only about 9 percent study any modern foreign language. More colleges should establish such foreign-language requirements. They should also create offerings in area studies and international comparative studies in different fields. In addition, they should provide broader opportunities for study abroad and for faculty development in international studies.

Colleges can also prepare instructional materials and deliver professional-development programs for elementary and secondary-school administrators and teachers to help enhance global values, foreign-language skills, and globalization expertise — much in the same way colleges took a leading role in supporting science education in high school in the 1950s and 60s. A recent report on developing international competence in teacher education noted

that although Title VI of the Higher Education Act provides resources for internationalizing the curriculum, those resources have seldom been used for programs to educate elementary and secondary teachers. Yet some institutions exemplify how colleges and universities can contribute to international education in schools. At Indiana University at Bloomington, for example, the School of Education provides professional development in international education to elementary and secondary social-studies teachers. Michigan State University's College of Education also offers such programs for local teachers.

It is also well within the special responsibility of higher education to educate the public in issues related to globalization. Colleges can produce the body of knowledge about global affairs that the general public needs access to. For example, Harvard University's David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies produces a magazine, *ReVista*, widely distributed and available on the Web, that covers contemporary issues about Latin America and U.S.-Latin American relations. The Watson Institute for International Studies at Brown University routinely posts on its Web site information on its core research topics: global security; poverty, inequality, and development; and global governance. Other higher-education institutions should pursue efforts along those lines.

Finally, colleges and universities can evaluate the different programs that exist or can be developed to support global competence at all education levels — thus creating a scientific knowledge base that helps discern what works well, with what effects, and at what cost. The creation of an empirically based body of knowledge about global education is an opportunity for schools of education to take a central role in their colleges and universities, as well as for interdepartmental collaboration between schools of education and international and area-studies centers. Encouraging such collaboration will require leadership and commitment from presidents and provosts.

As top administrators, trustees, faculty members, and students work together and with schoolteachers and school districts to prepare all American citizens for a global world, they will enhance their own international competencies. They will also demonstrate their commitment to serve the public at a time when the economic and security challenges that our nation faces only heighten the need for such solidarity and public service.

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