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Global Education & Liberal Education

FEATURED TOPIC

Some reorientation of the most familiar definitions of liberal education is essential if the goals of global education are to be met

NEW TYPES and levels of global education are developing within American higher education for several reasons, none of them particularly obscure. American students will almost certainly be involved in rising levels of global interaction—often in their work, at least sometimes in their leisure, and always in their citizenship. Moreover, expanding global connections, combined with obvious shifts in the global balance of power, make it clear that China, India, Brazil, and other regions, in addition to Europe, will

strongly shape our national future. Contemporary American students will have to develop a greater awareness of diverse parts of the globe than was expected of their counterparts of a generation ago, and they will probably have to adjust to some modifications to the idea of the United States as the sole superpower.

At the same time, many American students—amid great variety—are rather parochial in their experience and education, which creates a very real gap between the world taking shape around them and their own intellectual comfort zone. Lack of facility in a foreign language is the most glaring sign of the limitations of student preparation, but there are others. It is not possible to rely on students to bring a great deal to college in the way of relevant global training, such as knowledge of geography or comparative politics, which is the second main reason global education gains, or should gain, increasing attention. Better preparation for a global future can and should embrace real discussion of the drawbacks and challenges of current global trends. There need be no

blanket endorsement, and indeed a balanced assessment provides one of the links between global and liberal education. Assumptions of all sorts, both hostile and enthusiastic, need to be critically assessed.

Global education embraces, of course, a multitude of facets. Study abroad experiences, for example, can make important contributions to global awareness, particularly as these experiences reorient from an excessively European focus. Even with further encouragement, however, there are limits to how many students study abroad can attract, so too much reliance on this outlet will not get the job done. Enhanced recruitment of international students, when combined with careful mixing with Americans in classes and student life alike, can be a real help. New uses of technology, to link to classes at international universities, should play a growing role. And there is increasing interest in dual degrees and other collaborations with international students that can have direct educational benefits for American undergraduates.

But no effort to provide a global education can possibly succeed without a solid curricular base, which must be the focus of any discussion of the relationship between global and liberal education. Considerable attention must go to programs that serve students for whom global issues constitute a major focus, and there are clearly liberal-educational opportunities here. Because globalization itself is a multifaceted process, embracing contacts ranging from trade to culture and from the environment to health, a state-of-the-art global affairs major becomes a significantly interdisciplinary endeavor, always remembering that language training and discussion of international relations continue to have strong roles to play. A dozen or more disciplines can be (actively and) usefully engaged in shaping and staffing concentrations

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of this sort, which, happily, at least for the moment, also draw in sizeable numbers of interested students.

Global education, like its liberal counterpart, also seeks contact with students for whom global interests do not leap to the fore. Through changes in general education to permit an explicit global component, and through proposals for “global across the curriculum” experiments that would return students to explorations of global issues later in their undergraduate careers, proponents of global education urge the importance of bringing all students into some contact with global components. Like proponents of liberal education, they seek to have an extensive impact on the undergraduate curriculum, ideally at several junctures. Here, then, is where some friction can emerge between proponents of the two visions of undergraduate education.

Tensions

George Mason University’s current general education program, adopted in 2001, includes a global affairs category. According to the guidelines, courses in the category should deal with “causes and consequences of change in

significant global issues.” They may deal with a specific topic, or with cultures “outside the contemporary Western world” by “incorporating comparisons of several cultures.” Presumably any course in the category will convey the “interconnectedness, difference, and diversity that are central to understanding and operating in a global society.”

This new global affairs category was introduced as part of a program that was resoundingly justified, overall, in terms of liberal education. It essentially replaced earlier requirements in areas like philosophy. The faculty accepted the changes surprisingly readily, but it turns out that this was partly because some of them sincerely imagined that they could pour old curricular wine into the new bottle. Not surprisingly in retrospect, the category was soon flooded with course proposals on virtually any non-American humanities or social science topic that could be imagined. Entries included topics such as Platonic philosophy and the history of the Roman republic. Most of these courses, in turn, had been listed under the prior general education scheme, and of course it was not hard to defend them in the classic terms of liberal education. But they

simply did not qualify as global education. However worthy they may have been in other respects, they did not address significant global issues; they did not seriously embrace comparison; they had little if anything to do with conveying interconnectedness or diversity.

Obviously, the courses were put forward for several reasons, including sincere faculty devotion to the topics and a desire to capture enrollments. Nonetheless, the proposals indicated some real confusion about what global education entails, and how it requires some readjustments from standard liberal education fare.

A good bit of liberal education in the United States, particularly on the humanities side of the house, has been devoted to exposing students to the special beauties and intricacies of a Western canon. Some liberal education exemplars, particularly in certain small-college settings, continue to tout this goal, seeking to define the educated student in terms of the fullest possible exposure to Western history and culture. But again, however desirable it may be, this is simply not a global goal. It does not explicitly emphasize either the data or the habits of mind that serve a global vision.

In theory, liberal education staples that highlight purely Western classics might still be offered along with a global program. Yet apart from a certain degree of tension in principle, the real issue here concerns the amount of time available in a general education program. Is there space for an engineering or business student to fulfill the global goals and still take a classic course in Western civilization or philosophy? It is not often going to be possible to resolve the Western-global conundrum by simply insisting that students do both. Some genuine reorientation is essential.

Other curricular issues are less stark. Global education places a new premium on language training, with important non-Western offerings added to the mix and, ideally, with renewed attention to precollegiate foreign language exposure. As was true even with Western languages, questions remain about how much to require and how basic language courses can serve the purposes of both training and liberal education. The cultural concomitants of, say, an introductory sequence in Chinese or Arabic

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might moderate this familiar tension to some extent.

In principle, global education demands attention from both the social sciences and the humanities. The most common response to the global invocation emphasizes training in cultural diversity—exposure to at least one culture different

from one's own. But there is also an urgent need for work on global systems—the development and operation of contemporary political and economic contacts that powerfully shape the world. This dual focus on the cultural and the systemic is not at all incompatible with the goals of liberal education, which are also multidisciplinary. But it does make additional claims on course time and, therefore, raises the question of how much conventional general education material must be cleared away or restructured.

Obviously, the basic point is that some reorientation of the most familiar definitions of liberal education is essential if the goals of global education are to be met. There are conflicts over the time available for necessary courses as well as, to some extent, over basic purposes. Global education is not simply liberal education business as usual, and for some faculty members the choices will not be easy.

Habits of Mind

In the most fundamental sense, however, a fuller turn to global education amply fulfills classic goals of liberal education. The necessary



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innovations do not strike at the liberal core. The key to reconciliation involves asking proponents of global education to define their own basic learning outcomes.

Global education, even at an introductory general education level, desirably exposes students to a considerable range of data. One hopes that the educated American student will know something about Islam, something about the globalization of science, something about global disease threats and responses, something about the economic relationship between the

insistence on exposure to international cultural diversity. Teaching students to expect to need to compare (rather than to assume a universality for their own experiences and values), helping them learn how to do it, and encouraging a comparative openness and orientation that can last beyond the classroom—all of this is fundamental to the kind of analysis living in a global environment requires. It involves the need to encounter diversity, but it also encourages recognition of unexpected, sometimes beneath-the-surface similarities; comparison cuts two ways, and undue emphasis simply on differences can miss the mark.

Second, the globally educated student should gain experience and skill in dealing with relationships between the local and the global. The phrase, of course, is familiar enough, but the category needs further attention pedagogically; it has been less thoroughly probed than the injunction to learn to compare. With comparison we have some experience not just in presenting relevant materials, but in actually accelerating the process by which students move from an initial temptation simply to juxtapose two cases, to genuine and active comparative analysis; we are not so far along in identifying the learning processes associated with an evaluation of local-global causations. But it is obviously true that human lives are powerfully shaped by interactions between local and global forces, and that both humanities and social science disciplines can promote the necessary analysis by generating some range of historical and contemporary case studies. Again, the ultimate goal is to prepare students to apply classroom experience to local-global combinations, whose existence we can confidently predict but whose specifics await the future.

Neither of these global habits of mind emerges predictably from a typical liberal education outcomes list, but both are fully compatible with such lists. Both, after all, promote the capacity to identify and evaluate student assumptions; both encourage critical thinking. One of the strengths of the global approach, in fact, is that it offers new vantage points for students' exploration of their own values and their own society, as part of the broader global understanding. Though in fact it can be a demanding exercise, helping students see how others view American behaviors and institutions—to understand, not necessarily to accept the contrasts with homegrown assessments—



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United States and China, something about the complex relationship between the European Union and globalization—and this list can easily be expanded. The coverage list is where the tensions with a Western-centered definition of what every educated person should know emerge most strongly. But beneath such lists, and ultimately demanding far more concerted attention, the global education agenda pushes for two fundamental habits of mind that are readily compatible with any but the most hidebound understanding of the desired outcomes of a liberal education.

First, the globally educated student should gain experience and skill in comparing different cultures and systems. This is, after all, the approach that ultimately undergirds the common



can be one of the most interesting applications of a comparative, local-global approach.

Conclusion

In sum, it is both possible and desirable to define liberal education in “global” terms. Defining a global liberal education extends the purposes of liberal education itself, and provides additional rationale at a time of some real uncertainty about commitments to the enterprise. It changes the learning outcomes list, but it reinforces the most essential basics. It offers a shared agenda for further pedagogical work and best-practice reports, as we work on to help students develop fundamental cognitive skills. The liberal-global combination does require real, if bounded, readjustments,

however, and this means some additional debate and challenge. But it is well worth the effort to prepare students to think more constructively about global issues, and simply to think better in the process. Proponents of global education will benefit from a focus on the core learning outcomes they should be working toward, and their essentially liberal qualities, while proponents of liberal education will benefit from a fuller recognition of the global framework within which our students need to operate. □

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