



Association of International Education Administrators
Leaders in International Higher Education

An Imagination As Big As The World Itself

E. Gordon Gee
President
The Ohio State University

While I was in Shanghai in 2010 celebrating the opening of Ohio State's China Gateway, I hosted a breakfast meeting for area business leaders who live in China while working for corporations based in Ohio. We had more than two dozen join us for breakfast. Think about that fact for a moment. There are at least two dozen business leaders, in just one Chinese city, whose business world is centered in just one American state.

There are many who see a shrinking world and a stagnant domestic economy and define this as a moment of unprecedented challenge. I see it as a moment of unprecedented opportunity. Making that so calls for something more than finding a rosier tint for our eyeglasses, however. We need university and college presidents to vigorously assert the value of a global perspective in the intellectual lives of their institutions.

In *The Great Stagnation*, economist Tyler Cowen argues that the "low-hanging fruit" of American economic expansion was exhausted almost 40 years ago. Ours is a tired economy, he asserts, because the tools that catapulted daily life past the limits and indignities of candles and outhouses have already been invented, and the easy gains to be made from expanding education past the 8th-grade have already been realized. However, I would submit that there is another piece of low-hanging fruit well within our grasp.

For centuries, the world around us has largely been an afterthought in the education of young Americans. Today, we can reap the incomparable benefits of teaching a global perspective to the next generation of American thinkers and doers. For college and university presidents, no less than students, it is time to think bigger.

No nation is better positioned than the United States to expand our imagination and to thrive in the global knowledge economy. "Not in spite of, but because of our polyglot background," President Ronald Reagan once said, "we have had all the strength in the world." There is a spirit of discovery and creativity inherent in the American mosaic. To that we must add the transformative properties

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AIEA Secretariat | Campus Box 90404, Duke University | Durham, NC USA 27708-0404

Tel: 919-668-1928 | Fax: 919-684-8749 | Email: aiea@duke.edu



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of the work we do by bringing the world into our classrooms and sending our students out into the world.

By the numbers, Ohio State is already a global institution. We have 5,000 international students, and we send off one of the largest contingents of study abroad students each year. Our faculty hail from nearly 100 nations and our alumni live in more than 150.

Our tradition of global involvement flourishes across the continents as we fulfill our mission as a land-grant university serving our own community and the world at large.

More than five decades ago, Ohio State began a partnership with Punjab Agricultural University in India. What started with student exchanges and basic agricultural assistance has flourished into a collaboration that includes the public and private sectors, and is helping a nation feed itself. That is just one of 400 formal partnerships we have with universities in 66 countries.

Our professors have made the world our classroom. Ohio State M.B.A. students in a Business Solutions course used their skills to advise the Ethiopian government on how best to improve its economic development efforts. Students studied the country's agriculture and logistics infrastructure and offered proposals to help increase exports of flowers and coffee and other crops. The educational value of that real-world, global experience in diagnosing and solving problems is simply incalculable.

We have forged an exciting partnership to develop this nation's first teacher-training program with the Royal Shakespeare Company. Last summer, we sent our first delegation of Ohio school teachers to Stratford-on-Avon for an unforgettable immersion in the Bard's work that will shape their classroom teaching for decades to come. Participating teachers have already brought a set of vibrant lessons focused on reading aloud, performing, and discussing Shakespeare's work to thousands of area school children.

I am enormously proud of these global endeavors and the lessons they impart. However, this is not the time to rest on our laurels. In this small, flat, and connected world we now occupy, a university president must think bigger.

At Ohio State, we have launched our own foreign policy of sorts. In the process, we are now the first comprehensive university to ask all its students to acquire a passport. I believe a passport is a tool for the imagination. It has become what the driver's license once was: permission to explore our most relevant surroundings.

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With a greater emphasis on the world around us and a commitment to encouraging foreign exploration, we can ensure the next generation of leaders is fully prepared for the global tasks we now confront. We can ensure the next generation of business leaders is fully prepared for the far-flung opportunities that will arise. We can ensure that members of the next generation are citizens of the world, living a life made larger by a world made smaller. For what is travel to a faraway place but an immersion in the lessons of culture, communication, language, problem-solving, and teamwork? Students return imbued with the ability to value differences, build on commonalities, and to see what is beyond the horizon.

Imagine what it means for a first-generation college student from Bucyrus, Ohio, to hold a passport in his or her hands. Imagine the possibilities, the world conjured in his or her mind that suddenly has no borders, no limits.

We have taken my passport mantra directly to our students. A campus-wide marketing campaign has a succinct message: getting a passport is a practical necessity in the modern global economy. With incoming classes bearing the full brunt of my polite but firm suggestion, 66 percent of our first-year students now hold a passport. That is about double the proportion of the nation's population as a whole. Our goal for next year is 75 percent. Over four years, our goal is 100 percent.

Admittedly, when I first broached the idea of passports for every student, our local newspaper was inundated with responses from its readership. Nearly every comment was negative. This suggests to me that I am on to something important.

"Gee has an ulterior motive for this. What is it?" one reader asked. I do have a motive; it is this: As the world shrinks, opportunity grows. In a time when actions taken on one side of the globe have an immediate and profound impact on the other side, we simply must reach out more fully and effectively to one another.

Our passport program is just one essential part of our new globalization of the curriculum. We are building global experiences, global perspectives, and global interests in our students to better prepare them to thrive in a global economy and in their lives.

I hardly want to claim that we in Columbus have discovered the world before everyone else. Indeed, we are making our own unique contribution to the visionary work of many institutions, including Goucher College, Lewis and Clark College, and the University of Minnesota-Morris, that have reached out far across the continents.

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In the era and in the economy we now confront, all colleges and universities must strive to set loose from our campuses global citizens. For leaders in higher education, we must be creative without boundaries -- on a map or otherwise. We must push forward new global initiatives on our campuses -- take our students as far as we possibly can -- literally and figuratively. We can offer no better preparation for the future than to claim for our students an imagination as big as the world itself.

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