



AIEA PRESIDENTIAL PERSPECTIVES

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Global Learning and the Access Mission

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When our youngest graduated from high school in 2022, my husband and I asked each other, “What’s our next adventure?” As I began to look at president positions from our empty nest that fall (at the time I was chancellor of Penn State Beaver), I was guided by a new publication by Jeff Selingo, which called on higher education institutions to meet the needs of today’s students in what he calls The New Learning Economy. His three pillars for twenty-first-century higher education include a Frictionless Learner Experience (reducing barriers to higher education for all populations and meeting students where they are), Integrated Experiential Learning (which engages students hands-on in their field as they learn in experiences like those outlined in AAC&U’s High Impact Practices, including internships, global learning, and undergraduate research), and a Mixture of Credentials (including micro credentials such as stackable certificates towards a degree).

I was fortunate to find the university of the future in the University of Maine at Augusta (UMA). UMA already does much of what Selingo suggests, indicating that our model is one whose time has come. Founded in 1965 as a workforce development university in the capital city, we’ve developed into a locus of lifelong learning that serves students of all ages and populations, meeting students where they are to transform lives. My university serves underserved and under-resourced students, including veterans, justice-impacted, and adult learners, many of whom are first-generation college students who support families and exhibit financial need. With over half of our courses online, and with two campuses and eight Centers across the state, we keep our access mission at the center of our career-oriented academic offerings with a liberal arts foundation. So, I think daily about the access question: how do we provide ALL students the kinds of educational opportunities that will help them succeed in the twenty-first century?

AAC&U studies show that under resourced students benefit even more from their high-impact pedagogies than more traditional students. As noted, the AAC&U identifies “diversity and global learning” as a high-impact practice that contributes to student success. The coupling of the two may seem curious to some, but, as Dr. Thomas Kepple – who was president of Juniata College in central Pennsylvania, where I was dean of international education at the time – wrote in a 2011 AIEA Presidential Perspective on Diversity and International Collaboration, that universities should “encourage intercultural competencies by intentionally creating



environments in which students encounter and reflect upon difference,” a shared goal of both diversity and global learning. I will be further exploring this intersection of diversity and global learning for an upcoming giving campaign for UMA’s 60th anniversary, with a particular focus on how we better serve the needs of so-called “New Mainers,” those moving to Maine especially as immigrants and refugees.

It is unfortunate that, while central to any institution with an access mission, the concept of “diversity” in universities is increasingly under fire. Also unfortunate, but perhaps understandably so, international education is often viewed as an elitist endeavor. Over twenty years ago, Jane Knight noted in her “Issues and Trends in Internationalization” chapter of Bond and Lemasson’s work on Canadian international education¹ that “international education is perceived as the reserve of the elite,” that “as long as internationalization is thought of in terms of academic mobility, elitism will continue to be an issue” (Bond & Lemasson, 1999, p. 227). And the charge is not groundless: often, the students who study abroad – if as Knight points out, academic mobility remains our measure for global learning – are, of course, those that can afford the resources to travel and the time to take classes that might not match exactly with degree requirements. In the U.S. at least, according to Open Doors, fewer than 10% of undergraduates are able to manage studying abroad. The students at my university are most often NOT among that 10%. So, why would I think global learning is important?

As a German professor turned international education administrator turned president, I have seen firsthand the effect global learning can have on the least resourced. Certainly, the perspective global learning provides on one’s own cultural background is invaluable in developing intercultural competencies and self-confidence. Most importantly, students can gain a sense of their own place and agency in the world. Well-resourced students who have had the fiscal and cultural capital to travel may take that sense for granted, but it is a game changer for the least resourced. And most of our students WANT this. They are complex human beings who have not had opportunities to become as worldly as more privileged students, but they still think deeply about their lives and their context. We must see our students as nuanced, intelligent learners, and not “dumb down” their education. “Excellence v Equity” is not an either-or question as the March 28, 2015 issue of *The Economist* suggested when it featured a special report on universities. In fact, Mary Jean LeTendre, former director of Title I compensatory education for the U.S. Department of Education has suggested that this is a false dichotomy, saying, “Excellence in education need not mean elitism, and equity need not mean mediocrity.”

But what does it mean to foster excellence AND access in global learning, practically speaking? The first step is to bring students who may not have





envisioned the possibility of themselves in another context to the point where they can access the opportunity both physically and mentally. While we understand that, especially for our less privileged students, global learning opportunities need to include a connection to a career or life goal, they also need to be feasible. Recall Knight, who questions the measure of global learning as academic mobility alone. Of course, we wish all of our students could study abroad; little can compare with the shift of perspective the experience brings. But it's simply not realistic given the lack of resources of most of our students – and our universities which serve them.

Obviously, we need to consider strategies different from education abroad to foster global learning, but different need not imply lesser. One strategy lies in the specter of online education, which, interestingly, offers international educators new tactics to connect internationally. Collaborating technologically with international partners in the classroom is an example of a strategy that can work for our students. Many professors have been using this good practice for many years, and the State University of New York embraced the model across its system over a decade and a half ago, establishing Collaborative Online International Learning or (COIL). A type of international virtual exchange, COIL involves using technology to connect students around the world on projects during a few weeks of the semester.

Sustainable global learning opportunities like COIL should be a priority at any higher education institution in 2024. After a global pandemic and in the midst of worldwide unrest, it is clear that the United States and its institutions of higher education can no longer claim exceptionalism from world events, and that our student outcomes should surely include global learning. High-impact practices like global learning that further Selingo's second pillar, Integrated Experiential Learning, are essential especially for lesser-resourced students. Dr. Keppel's AIEA Presidential Perspective from 2011 acknowledged that "Creating an atmosphere in which students can cultivate intercultural skills of all kinds, from the local to the global, is a noble goal, but it can be difficult to achieve in practice. Too often units on campus perceive themselves as competing for resources or attention, and lose sight of the larger mission to educate students for the twenty-first century." For that reason, he noted, it "takes leadership from the highest level to thwart territorialism and inspire a college community to share a common vision, to work together towards meaningful goals." As presidents, it is our responsibility to ensure that ALL our students can access the experiences that contribute to their success in the twenty-first century by supporting diversity and global learning.

ⁱ *A New World of Knowledge: Canadian Universities and Globalization*

