



Association of International Education Administrators
Leaders in International Higher Education

How Presidents Can Foster an International Culture on Campus

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As university presidents, we must heed the challenge issued by Nancy L. Zimpher, chancellor of the State University of New York system, when she said: “We are in a flat world. We are going to have to evolve.” While she was speaking of a crisis of confidence in the current structure of American higher education, her use of Thomas Friedman’s ‘flat world’ image incorporates the role of international culture into that broader narrative. Any institution’s quest for relevance in the changing landscape of higher education takes place in a triangle formed by public perception, student demographics and financial resources. While highly selective institutions have positive marks in each side of the triangle, the vast majority of us do not score as well. How then does that evolving education landscape incorporate the role of international culture on campus for most institutions?

It is troubling, but I believe true, that fostering an international culture on a university campus was probably easier to accomplish in 1991 than it is in 2011. Then, international business textbooks emerged with material on culture, language and religion alongside marketing, accounting and statistical principles. Long standing cold war area studies centers migrated to address other parts of the world, a transition later accelerated by the tragic events of September 11th. While enrollment in language studies remained concentrated in Spanish, French and German, significant increases in Arabic, Korean and Chinese were also registered. The quest for prosperity and the desire to retain cultural identity and tradition were posed as a healthy tension in Friedman’s 1999 text The Lexus and the Olive Tree. The appreciation/narrative of international culture was seen as a positive and compelling value for all.

Beginning in 1972, the United States Department of Education recognized the importance of international culture and studies on our campuses. As we know, their response was to expand the language of the National Defense Education Act to create a series of programs generally referred to as Title VI funding. For the next thirty years significant Title VI funding was competitively provided to institutions ranging from community colleges to research universities. Distinctive programs were created in language, international studies, and business, as well as the development of National Resource Centers (NRCs), Foreign Language and Area Studies Fellowships (FLAS) and the Fulbright-Hays Program. The purpose of the programs was clear: “...to form the vital infrastructure of the federal Government’s investment in the international service pipeline.” The provision of

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significant funding was designed to induce participation by universities, especially in programs and disciplines outside the traditional scope of language, literature and foreign area studies.

Responding to a suggestion from a 1995 Association of International Education Administrators (AIEA) workshop, I became involved in a year-long Federal study to identify specific factors which could be used to assess the use of Title VI funding to achieve its multiple goals. The overall findings were important but not startling. Faculty and student interest followed by campus leadership topped the list of individual factors, while the creation of a separate office to manage international programs was deemed most important from the institutional perspective. The notable factor which emerged from the study was the significant role of the federal government to entice these changes on campus. Thus even at a high point of interest in making international culture studies more visible, the pivotal force -Federal funding- was largely external to broader campus conversations. For the next fifteen years, Title VI programs continued to build, expand and focus campus attention on these initiatives.

More recently, other factors began to compete for attention on campus, especially within the debate on the cost and relevance of higher education. Important conversations on STEM disciplines, multicultural studies and the need for 'real world' skills often neglected to incorporate the narrative which had previously sustained the relevance of international culture on campus. In this period of national economic turmoil, federal and state budget decisions moved to accommodate the new imperatives. As a result, for 2011, overall Federal funding for international programs through Title VI was reduced by 40%, with the loss in individual programs ranging from 47% to 100%. No further competitions will be held for FY 2011 and the emerging sentiment in Congress and the Administration appears to be that universities should support these programs even though they are designed to sustain a national capacity in international culture and awareness. Even at the state level, New York eliminated its Regents exams in Spanish, French and Italian for graduating high school seniors in order to save \$700,000 from a budget of \$132 billion.

Amidst these competing, persistent and sometimes messy debates on campus, university presidents still retain a peculiar position to influence their institution. A president must give voice to international culture by emphasizing its importance and directing resources, while incorporating global snippets into daily expectations. Something as simple as hanging flags in the student union from the nations represented on campus can capture as much attention as financial assistance to support study abroad programs. Broadening the number, destination and discipline of those travel programs, introducing an international dimension to the core academic curriculum and establishing an international office on campus are also visible waypoints. A president's personal attention to the topic must elevate the discussion, even if others on campus and in the sustaining community might disagree. For some institutions, that attention may suffice and provide sufficient space for program

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growth among competing causes. But that personal attention may also marginalize the discussion into a 'teacher's pet' syndrome.

After thirty years of involvement in all facets of international culture on multiple campuses, I believe that Nancy Zimpher is correct and we must evolve. Specifically, to thrive, the narrative for international culture must embrace those new, competing initiatives. Too often the presence and role of international culture has been seen as separate from, or as an alternative to, another academic good. We are called upon to generate more STEM programs and graduates to offset the 'threat' from abroad. Study abroad is seen as a nice interlude, while internships are valued introductions to essential life/employment skills. Multicultural studies celebrate our diversity, but seem to stop at the water's edge for partners and relevance. Intellectual growth as the rationale for a university education, especially the role of the liberal arts, is often separated from the linguistic and cultural growth occasioned by international studies.

As presidents, we must begin to ask how each of these initiatives-STEM, internships/experiential learning, multicultural studies- incorporates an international cultural perspective. We must revisit our mission, values and vision statements to go beyond the standard phrase of graduating students who will make valuable contributions to an increasingly global society. For those of us accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS), we must ensure that our Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) incorporates a dimension of international culture. As visionary presidents we must affirm that appreciation and awareness of international culture is essential. As pragmatic presidents, we must incorporate that passion for international culture in the emerging narrative where funding, especially at the federal level, is increasingly responsive to other important demands.

Friedman concludes that the secure jobs of the future are those he terms 'untouchable,' immune from outsourcing and other trends of the emerging global economy. Presidents must strive to make international culture at their institutions 'untouchable' by embedding its presence in the campus narrative, rather than setting it apart.

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