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The Case For Internationalizing Our Curriculum

My basic proposition in this essay is that knowledge of the rest of the world--the other major cultures; the political, social, and economic conditions of the world's major areas; and the historical backgrounds of both--is essential for Americans now and in the foreseeable future. Whether argued from our economy's inextricable interdependence with the world economy or from the fact that most important national issues are also international ones, the conclusion is that our national well-being, and even survival, depend on others as well as ourselves. If this is true, then it should follow that knowledge of the rest of the world is essential for all Americans, especially those who are university educated since they are more likely to occupy positions of leadership and influence in our society. This is not, of course, an original idea. Within the last decade the case has been made in a variety of forms by a variety of people, but with uniform urgency. A couple of examples:

The world as we have known it through much of this century is rapidly changing....To be our own masters we must understand our global environment for what it really is....Since our schools and universities are the fundamental institutions through which we gain an understanding of the world, it must be upon them that we rely to illuminate our perceptions of the world as it really is.

Cyrus Vance, former Secretary of State

Our ignorance, which extends to countries around the globe, seriously compromises our position in the world. Colleges and universities in the past 20 years have been partly to blame for this problem; they must now become part of the solution.

John Brademus, former congressman, Chancellor of the SUNY system

Two questions must be answered. Has our country in fact been swept into an international economic, political, and cultural whirlpool? And if so, is it the responsibility of higher education to change in response to this world situation?

As to the first question, a reasonable amount of observation and reflection will suggest that politics, ideology, technology, and economics are the substance of most of the crises and national policy dilemmas which an informed citizenry has to address today. A review of recent and continuing national preoccupations would include Iraq, Kuwait, Iran, Nicaragua, Vietnam, Japan, South Africa, Afghanistan, the breakup of the Soviet Union, our trade deficit, international competitiveness, and destruction of the environment. Our country's loss of economic independence is perhaps the most observed and keenly felt aspect of this global interdependence right now.

Speaking of U.S. indebtedness, Lester Thurow, Dean of MIT's School of Management, said in 1988, "the danger is that we'll be treated like Mexico and we'll be told how to run our own

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country." Dean Thurow's concern about us becoming a ward of the International Monetary Fund may be alarmist, and Mexico now looks much healthier economically, but what is clear is that the U.S. will be neither an independent nor the dominant economic-political power in the foreseeable future. Interdependence is here, and we must learn how to live and cope with it--which means that we must learn to live and cope with the other major cultures and countries of the world.

The second issue of whether or not the university curriculum should be relevant to the world in which the graduate will live and work is not a new one. We have come generally to accept relevance as an important criterion provided that we are not adapting to fads or other transitory situations. It does seem clear that political, technological, and economic interdependence, for good or ill, are not temporary phenomena. The implications for the university curriculum are well summarized by Harlan Cleveland, former Ambassador to NATO and Director of the University of Minnesota's Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs:

...science, humanities, and social studies are all basics, but the content of the basics has to shift with the times. What is basic in our time is the need for international competence. Not "Back to Basics," but "Forward to Basics" should be printed on the placards of the next generation's reformers.

The 1979 statement of principles for general education adopted by our own faculty senate reads in part, "knowledge of the content, style, and future trends of the major non-Western cultures must also constitute a part of this preparation." We already have a foundation.

My argument is that global interdependence is a fact. Further, this new world situation is of sufficient importance and permanence to warrant adjusting our curriculum and activities to enable our graduates to cope with it in their careers and in their civic responsibilities. If through thoughtful discourse this faculty can arrive at a consensus which recognizes the importance and urgency of internationalization, we then can proceed to discussion of what adjustments need to be made and how we can go about making them.

Ellerd Hulbert, Professor of History and Director of International Development

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If you would like to respond to Ellerd's opinion piece, please send your comments either to Ellerd at 530 HFR Administration or to Terry Nienhuis at the FCTE, 161 Hunter Library. Please indicate whether you are willing to be quoted or prefer to remain anonymous.