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February 16, 2010, 05:06 PM ET

What Does It Mean to 'Internationalize' Higher Ed?

By [Stan Katz](#)

Apparently one of those large associations of higher education administrators, this one dealing with "international education," has been meeting in Washington. I use quotations around "international education," since the term does not have a fixed meaning -- and I am pretty sure that it means something different to me than it does to the Association of International Education Administrators. or to Martha Kanter, the Obama under secretary of education, [who told the meeting](#) that the administration is committed to internationalizing American education from K through 16. *The Chronicle* report on the meeting quotes Kanter as announcing that "international education cannot be seen as an add-on. . . . The skills and knowledge acquired in international education are the same skills graduates need to succeed in the economy." [Speaking today at the same conference](#), Nancy Zimpher, president of SUNY, urged participants to act to implement international-education programs on their campuses. Zimpher stressed that "universities' international work had to be done in the context of trade and immigration policy." According to *The Chronicle*, Zimpher concluded that "vision trumps everything."

Indeed, but whose vision? What vision? Judging by the excerpts in *The Chronicle*, the vision of "international education" at the AIEA meeting is crudely utilitarian -- education as a strategy for economic growth. I can understand why government officials and public university presidents feel the need to make such arguments, but I hope they also have a broader and deeper sense of the cognitive potential of international education. The skills needed to succeed in the economy are indeed appropriately taught in our universities, but if those skills are too narrowly construed they will not be as useful as their proponents claim.

We have been discussing international education for many years, and "internationalization" has been one of the poster children for educational leadership for the past quarter-century, but we are still not agreed on what the markers of such education might be. Study abroad? Foreign-language acquisition? Knowledge of "foreign" cultures? Internationalized faculties and student bodies? Internationalization of curricula? Each of those approaches has its proponents, and one might name other approaches, but there is no consensus as to what these phrases mean. What should we do to "internationalize" the curriculum? How should we present foreign cultures? And so forth.

Further, what programmatic steps must be taken to implement internationalization on our campuses? Do we have adequate faculty resources for teaching about the world outside our borders? Area studies have been dramatically weakened, for instance, and have tended to disappear in many social science fields -- would Henry Rosovsky, a specialist on Japan, get tenure in today's Harvard Economics Department? Is the Fulbright Program as effective in supporting the foreign area training of American graduate students as it once was? What sorts of foreign study programs are educationally most effective -- or should we simply be concerned to get American students out of the United States for at least a year?

More of our students are studying abroad, and at some level that must be a positive development, but are we doing all that we might to enhance their understanding of the experience? Does it matter where they go to study abroad? Are we truly succeeding in encouraging our students to acquire deep facility in foreign languages, especially the less commonly learned languages? Or, on a completely different level, are American universities playing a truly active (and reactive) role in the international educational arena?

I certainly agree with President Zimpher that vision is the key, but her vision of internationalization is not mine. What concerns me is

enhancing the cognitive experience of undergraduates, and I would prioritize those programs that address student learning directly. Until students have deeply internationalized cognitive experiences, they will not fully benefit from international education. *Au fond*, I think we have to think and talk about the problem as educators, not marketers.

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The Chronicle of Higher Education 1255 Twenty-Third St, N.W. Washington, D.C. 20037