



News, Views and Careers for All of Higher Education

Dec. 19

International Study Shouldn't Be Elective

By [Sally Blount-Lyon](#)

Every American decade has its archetypes. If you were heading off to business school in the 1980s, you might have wondered – or even worried – you'd end up like Alex Keaton from the hit TV series "Family Ties." Alex scoffed at the Peace Corps past of his parents, and believed he could amass all the wealth and status that he wanted without being too concerned about the political affairs of the world around him — beyond, perhaps, advocating for lower tax rates on capital gains.

Today Alex would not survive, much less thrive, in a world marketplace where economic events in nearly every developing and industrialized nation can dramatically impact the fortunes of others. Growing affluence in China coupled with the rise of ethanol, for example, has increased the demand for meat, which drives up global grain prices. At the same time, instability in the Nigerian delta directly influences the price of oil in New York, and a small business in Germany could easily be denied a loan from a distressed local bank that has over-invested in mortgages in the United States. Meanwhile, as we've seen in just the past few weeks, the implosion of the U.S. financial system continues to send aftershocks to financial markets and economies across the globe.

Unfortunately, too few colleges or universities are preparing students to understand these global dynamics. According to the Center for International Initiatives at the American Council on Education, the percentage of colleges that require a course with an international or global focus as part of the general education curriculum fell from 41 percent in 2001 to 37 percent in 2006. And 27 percent of the nation's colleges and universities have no students at all who study abroad. But even among the colleges and universities that do promote "semester abroad" programs, most offer these as add-ons to the required course of study, providing students with only a taste of life in another nation and a small selection of elective courses.

A far better approach would be to make international study a core component of undergraduate education in the 21st century — requiring students to spend a significant portion of their college years abroad (e.g., two or more semesters) and do it while studying in multiple locations. Students would thereby be exposed to the interconnections across multiple countries and cultures, so they have the opportunity to gain insight into the complex economic and political factors shaping our world.

My certainty on the need for this approach has been influenced by 20 years of experience as a business school educator. As a professor at the University of Chicago in the 1990's, I first observed the prevalence of a "free market ideology" among our first and second year M.B.A. students – a viewpoint that over-simplifies market dynamics and their impact on the social and political landscape. That's when I first began to think about new models for undergraduate education that incorporate a deeper understanding of global economic dynamics and the interconnection between the private and public sectors.

Now, as dean at the New York University Stern School of Business's Undergraduate College, I've worked with our faculty to create a new bachelor's degree in business and political economy, designed to foster deeper understanding of the intersections between international business, politics and economics. Our new curriculum not only integrates these perspectives, but

Looking for a job?
[See all 181 new postings](#)
[Browse all job listings:](#)
[Faculty: 3,702](#)
[Administrative: 1,622](#)
[Executive: 191](#)
[FEATURED EMPLOYERS](#)



Related stories

- [The Propaganda of International Comparisons](#), Dec. 15
- [Key Win for Scholar Kept Out of U.S.](#), Dec. 9
- [Women Abroad and Men at Home](#), Dec. 4
- [An Ambitious Approach to Overseas Expansion](#), Sept. 16
- [Mapping the Indian Business Student Boom](#), Oct. 2, 2007

requires students to spend three semesters of global study on three different continents, where they experience the course of business in both industrialized and emerging market nations.

During their sophomore year in London, for example, students will study the foundations of economics and politics in Europe's financial center, under the guidance of faculty from both NYU and local institutions. In Shanghai during the junior year, they will experience life in a developing country where commerce is thriving yet challenged by centuries of strict political rule. From there, they will travel to developing markets in India to gain a first-hand understanding of how a nation strives for capitalistic momentum despite having a large population of undereducated and underemployed citizens — and how these converging factors of economics and politics will likewise impact India's strength as a developing nation in the world marketplace.

Through the experience, the students will learn how markets, corporations, governments, religions and cultures converge in nations that are inextricably linked to the success of capitalism in the U.S. — an understanding that cannot be easily replicated without spending a significant amount of time living and learning in these nations.

While I recognize that NYU's existing infrastructure and history of international education enhance our ability to create this type of experience, there are many other ways for colleges and universities to better open students' eyes to the convergence between international markets, economies, cultures and governments. They can begin by weaving the subject matter into existing coursework, combining international economics and business courses with politics, sociology and religion courses.

They can also augment their current foreign exchange programs — going beyond simply having students “visit” back and forth — by investing in deeper, more elaborated partnerships. For example, colleges from different continents could invest in developing integrated curricula across two (or more) global partner institutions. So that when students study abroad at a partner campus they would have a more seamless academic experience, one that is specifically designed to promote deeper understanding of global economic, social and political issues. These programs could be supplemented by distance learning opportunities and the use of digital technology to connect students across partner campuses for virtual and collaborative learning experiences when back at their home campus.

While these recommendations may sound daunting, I would argue that moving undergraduate education in this direction is a social imperative. Given the ever-increasing connectedness of our complex world, students need to understand how political tensions, conflicting attitudes about globalization and religion, and the ever-expanding reach of free markets will impact worldwide security and the future of the global marketplace. And the best way to make that happen is to send them packing — inspired and determined to understand the wonders of the world around them.

Sally Blount-Lyon is dean of the NYU Stern School of Business Undergraduate College, and special advisor to the provost for global academic integration at New York University.

Got something to say? [Add a comment.](#)

Want it on paper? [Print this page.](#)

Know someone who'd be interested? [Forward this story.](#)

Want to stay informed? [Sign up for free daily news e-mail.](#)

Advertisement



ARE YOU STARTING YOUR DAY WITH INSIDE HIGHER ED?
 “Whatever else I read, I always read Inside Higher Ed.”
 Robert Oden, President, Carleton College [CLICK TO SIGN UP FOR FREE DAILY NEWS UPDATES.](#)

Comments

This is an ambitious goal, but wouldn't work for many non-traditional older students, especially those with families. The number of students in this group has been growing in university populations, and the addition of such a requirement would place university study beyond the reach of these students.

Simon, at 9:30 am EST on December 19, 2008

I agree with Simon that it is ambitious. However, if it were tied to particular degree programs it makes enormous sense. Non-traditional students may likely seek other degrees that instead of this type of travel requirement would have more electronic

collaborations with overseas partners. Those students could even learn a great deal from the students who are traveling if connected through electronic means such as podcasts, blogs and wikis. It may not be quite as rich of an experience as the student with the opportunity to travel, but it will go a long way to improving our current lack of globally educated students. I think the bigger question is how to fund travel for those students who are able to physically go. Building cooperative agreements with partner institutions will need to consider how to make such travel affordable as well as the curricular structure.

Lauren, at 12:30 pm EST on December 19, 2008

And who is going to foot the bill for this? I would love to have sent my daughter to Vienna for our overseas program during her sophomore year, but I couldn't afford the extra thousands of dollars to do so. I suspect that would be the case with most students and their families.

Rob Mossack, Director, Academic Advising at Lipscomb University, at 1:35 pm EST on December 19, 2008

International Study Is Not Valued — Why Mandate It?

Regardless of any intrinsic merits of international study (and I would argue that there can be merits), the sobering fact is that neither international study, foreign language study, nor "global awareness" are valued in the U.S. They simply do not enhance one's employability in an environment which claims that such expertise can be hired from abroad, hired among recent immigrants or children of same, or outsourced, or hired on an "as needed" basis.

In fact, there is substantially more demand for holders of English degrees than possessors of fluency in any given foreign language. Even people with comparative literature competencies don't get hired for those jobs regardless of their levels of literacy and writing skills.

In areas where one might presume to think that foreign language students or students with overseas study experience would have significant advantages, they in fact do not. Not even the U.S. State Department hires for foreign language competency, and foreign language competency has very little to do with consular appointments.

Work experience abroad is generally not valued by U.S. employers, whether possessed by U.S. or foreign nationals. Perhaps it's viewed as more difficult to verify. Regardless, it seems to be largely extraneous to employment in this country. It might as well have happened in a dream.

There are significant problems with this set of attitudes and their ramifications, but no recent graduate is going to be able to change these.

Scrawed, at 4:10 pm EST on December 19, 2008

Actually, in a Very Special Episode of Family Ties, Alex P. Keaton studies abroad at Oxford. A good lede, no doubt, but inaccurate.

[David](#), at 5:50 pm EST on December 19, 2008

© Copyright 2008 *Inside Higher Ed*