

# International Higher Education in the USA: Trends and Perspectives

Witold P. Wolny \*

## Abstract

Over the last 10-15 years, there have been interesting changes in the argot of the professionals working in the field of international higher education. At the beginning of this period, the key word was “internationalization” of our campuses that mainly meant increasing study abroad options and presence of international students on campus. The focus on internationalization was complemented by cross-curricular initiatives. Recent trends go further – the goal is to achieve deeper impact on curricula cross all academic disciplines. This article provides some statistic data and theoretical remarks about international education trends in general, and in the US in particular.

## Zusammenfassung

In den letzten 10-15 Jahren ist ein interessanter Paradigmenwechsel der Begrifflichkeiten im Bereich der internationalen tertiären Bildung feststellbar. Zu Beginn dieser Periode war das Schlüsselwort „Internationalisierung“ unserer Institutionen, was hauptsächlich das Anwachsen der Möglichkeiten im Ausland zu studieren bedeutete, aber auch die Präsenz von internationalen Studierenden am eigenen Campus. Der Fokus der Internationalisierung wurde durch cross-curricular Initiativen erweitert. Der Trend hält an – das Ziel ist eine vertiefte Auswirkung auf die Curricula in allen akademischen Disziplinen zu erreichen. Dieser Artikel enthält einige statistische Daten und theoretische Anmerkungen zu den Entwicklungen internationaler Bildungstrends im Allgemeinen, und im Besonderen in den Vereinigten Staaten.

## 1 Introduction

Over the last 10 years, international education all over the world in general, and in the United States in particular, has become an essential component of higher education curricula. The total number of students studying abroad around the world in 2005 was 3 million. In 2012 it was 4.5 million, and it is projected to reach 8 million in 2025.

The US is still the world’s leading destination, reaching almost 900 000 international students during the last year (8% growth in comparison to the previous year) but US share is falling by 0.5% per year. Growing number of international students has to do with even faster growing global trends. More than 50% of all international students in the US are from the top 3 countries: China (31%), India (12%), and South Korea (8%), but the fastest growth comes from new emerging economies: Kuwait (+41%), Brazil (+22%) and Saudi Arabia (+21%). Financial contribution to the US economy is not trivial – international students contributed over \$27 billion to the US economy in 2013.

Apart from the “hard benefits” - money feeding directly into the US economy through tuition, living expenses, insurance, travelling etc. – there are also “soft benefits”, namely the contribution of ideas and work from the best graduated international students who can opt for so called OPT program (Optional Practical Training) that allows them to work for US companies during 12 month following their graduation, which is extendable for an additional 17 months (up to 29 in total) for STEM degrees (Science-Technology-Engineering-Mathematics). During 2008-2012 over 500,000 OPT approvals were issued. In some cases those students can stay in the US if they have been sponsored by an employee to obtain the H1B working visa, or even the Green Card. This “brain capture”, according to Mikio Kaku, is one of the best “America’s secret weapons”. The

---

\* Director of International Programs, The University of Virginia’s College at Wise, One College Avenue, Wise, VA 24293, USA. E-mail: [internationalprograms@uvawise.edu](mailto:internationalprograms@uvawise.edu)

economic and scientific development of the US would be difficult to sustain without the constant and growing influx of foreign students, researchers and highly skilled workers.

All this begs to the question: to what degree are the American students and colleges affected by the multicultural population of almost 1 million international students? Is there a significant positive impact on the overall process of internationalization? Here are a few factors to consider:

International students are mainly studying STEM and Business – these fields are covered by more than 50% and in case of India, China or Iran almost 90%, but this is not a general trend. The Fine Arts are leading areas for South Korean or Taiwanese students, Intensive English for students from Japan, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia and Social Sciences are most popular for German and UK students.

If the financial contribution to the US economy is significant, the impact of the international student population on the overall US campus idiosyncrasy is less impressive. International enrollment constituted only 4% of all U.S enrollment, whereas in the UK or Austria, every one out of 5 students is international (20%).

These numbers also depend on the region; for example, in Washington DC, 11% of students are international whereas in the central or northern States (with exception of WA) this ratio is almost insignificant. A closer look at the US map shows that the impact of international student population is pretty much limited to large metro areas in the western and eastern coast - 5% of institutions host 70% of international students.

Another problem that may limit the extension and depth of multicultural impact on US campuses is the fact that a number of universities developed programs specialized with specific cohorts of students. This means that, even if the numbers of international students are significant, they mainly represent one particular country or culture. Consequently, these cohorts might be unsurprisingly ghettoized, students tend to hide within their own group, and their cultural identity is reinforced and less vulnerable for a “positive infection” by the new cultural environment. For example, Asian students tend to be shy, because they are ashamed to speak up in English due to their particular difficulties with American pronunciation, whereas students from Saudi Arabia (particularly female that are obligated to come with a family member male companion) - maybe shielded by their religious-ethic codes and customs.

For US students, engaging with international students may also be challenging. Apart from the language barriers, sometimes there is simply not enough time - many international students are short term (one or two semester exchange) leaving less time for grounded relationships. Cultural or religious differences may also be at times problematic. Apart from typical socio-cultural prejudices and misjudgments there might be more relevant issues to overcome. One of my colleagues, a director of the international office at large university, brought up the case of a student who inquired about the possibility of bringing with him to the US his 14-years old wife to whom he was legally married in his home country. Another case from my own experience is that of an international female student whose parents insisted that she must return to her own country, in order to marry a man that they found for her and that she had never even met before. These may sound like somewhat extreme cases, but it is just a sample of possible factors that may limit or challenge the process of cross-cultural mutual enrichment.

## 2 US students abroad

Almost 300 000 US students studied abroad for academic credit during 2012/2013. There was a steady 2% increase every year of that trend. Top fields of study are STEM (21%), Social Sciences (22%), and Business (20%), top destinations are UK (12%), Spain (10%) and France (9%) – overall more than 50% of US students chose Europe as their destination.

Nevertheless the average percentage is not impressive. In 2012/13, only 1.4% of US students studied abroad. The percentage of all of the US undergraduates who studied abroad during their degree program were more optimistic - reaching 9.4% - but still far from being satisfactory. In recent years, a growing advocacy trend for increasing study abroad has been an essential part of the academic curricula. On example could be the Simon Program inspired by Senator Paul Simon (D – Ill.). His idea was to create a program of challenge grants to incentivize colleges and universities to make study abroad an integral part of higher education. The Simon Program has three national goals:

1. One million U.S. college students will study abroad annually for credit by 2020 (that is a 300% increase).
2. Study abroad participants will be representative of the undergraduate population in terms of gender, ethnicity, income level, and fields of study.
3. A significantly greater proportion of study abroad will occur in nontraditional destinations outside Western Europe.

This program will be supported by federal grants available for those colleges that decide to make study abroad an integral part of their curricula. A legislation to establish this program has already been introduced in Congress and the corresponding bill was passed twice by the House with bipartisan support. This may be an important step in balancing the US incoming vs outgoing ratio (at this moment it is 3:1) and the fact that this impulse comes from the highest federal level, may help to re-focus the academic community at large, in particular in small or more remote areas of the country.

Some colleges already went even further, making study abroad a requirement for graduation (for example, Goucher College in Maryland).

### 3 Internationalization vs Cross-curricular Education vs Global Education

Over the last 10-15 years, there have been interesting changes in the argot of the professionals working in the field of international higher education. At the beginning of this period, the key word was “internationalization” of our campuses, this mainly meant increasing study abroad options and the presence of international students on campus. These trends, however, if very important, were limited by factors described above, and by the trivial fact that many US students won’t be able to go abroad for economic, socio-cultural or circumstantial reasons. This doesn’t mean that efforts for establishing international offices and study abroad programs were in vain. But an average of 1.4% of US students abroad is by far too insignificant for a real impact. The focus on internationalization was complemented by cross-curricular initiatives, namely the introduction of cultural diversity in course offerings, supported by the General Education credits requirement in Liberal Arts colleges. Recent trends go further and “deeper” – since internationalization does not necessarily imply real change of college’s idiosyncrasy (→ ghettoization) or a deeper impact on curricula, and student population with international experience are and will be for many more years limited, hence a new approach is needed. Academic community and administrators have become more and more sensitive to the fact that all students need to be prepared to work in a global market. The new idea of global education means that all courses and academic areas should contain a global perspective and be designed with global sensitivity. Leading US schools are introducing this idea through workshops and incentives for Faculty who are encouraged to re-write their syllabi and rethink their approach to teaching methodology. A few examples could be: a new reading list for an English literature class that includes English-speaking authors or translations from a variety of cultures, a sociology class in cooperation with another similar class overseas (using social media, Skype etc. to aid students in their projects with their virtual classmates overseas), a Spanish class in which students are invited to visit local Hispanic communities or a math class that includes sections on Muslim contributions to geometry and algebra. Purdue University offers special electronic badges to those students who completed a series of courses classified as “global”. Those badges can be used in their LinkedIn profile to increase their attractiveness for potential employers.

Global education complements or extends international studies, and the main challenge for US colleges is the establishment of comprehensive global/international academic milieu as the leading trend and requirement for accreditation.

#### Sources

- <http://iie.org/opendoors> (data on academic mobility to and from the US)
- <http://iie.org/projectatlas> (data on global student mobility)
- @IIEGlobal @IIEResearch (Quick alerts on international education news and trends)
- [http://www.nafsa.org/Explore\\_International\\_Education/Trends/](http://www.nafsa.org/Explore_International_Education/Trends/) (International Education trends).
- Washington International Education Conference materials - <http://washcouncil.org/past-conferences/>
- AAC&U (American Association of Colleges and Universities) conference for Global Learning in College, Minnesota, October 2014. (Conference materials).