

Internationalization at Home: Seizing the Moment

Madeleine Greene

Abstract

A major question in the ongoing debate about the shape of higher education in the wake of COVID-19 is whether the pandemic will provide new energy and new thinking to internationalization at home (IaH). Getting unstuck will require seizing the moment, creating new language and a renewed sense of purpose, and commitment and leadership at many institutional levels.

As scholars and practitioners ponder the future of internationalization, a major question is whether the pandemic will give new energy to internationalization at home (IaH), especially given that mobility will be curtailed in the foreseeable future. Will this disruption of the status quo push institutions to focus their attention on the academic and sociocultural benefits of IaH and rediscover the underlying values and principles of internationalization that have been overshadowed by the economic aspects? Will the benefits of increased access to global learning, a lower carbon footprint, and diminished brain drain provide new impetus for IaH? Can higher education envision an integrated, rather than an “either/or”, approach to IaH and mobility? Progress to date on IaH has been spotty at many institutions. As outlined below, a number of conditions will have to be present in order for IaH to get unstuck.

Taking Advantage of the Moment

More often than not, a sense of urgency is required to generate the energy for important changes. Such pressure is usually a result of an external force or set of circumstances—budget crises, changes in government policy, and now COVID-19. Although IaH has moved slowly on most campuses, there is now a window of opportunity to turn campus attention to IaH. If students are not going to be mobile in the near future, what other ways are available for them to develop global knowledge and skills? An internally generated change such as IaH usually starts with the perception that something is not working (a problem) or at least that it could be working a lot better (an opportunity). IaH represents both a solution to a problem (the need to provide students with greater global knowledge and intercultural skills), and an opportunity (to reach a much larger proportion of students, faculty, and staff). A first step for change leaders is to seize the moment to develop a shared recognition and definition of the problem and of the opportunity that circumstances present for addressing that problem. This requires that leaders give visibility to IaH, start the conversation, and catalyze abundant discussions among faculty, usually at the department and program level. These conversations should lead to agreement on the nature of the problem, shared goals, and a strategy for action.

Reframing the Discussion: Ends, Not Means

A theme of current internationalization discourse is that internationalization is not an end in itself. Rather, it is a means of furthering institutional and societal goals—enhancing the quality of teaching and research, fostering an educated citizenry, and solving local and world problems. Reframing the discussion in terms of internationalization’s goals rather than processes should enable a focus on IaH as a key methodology for promoting global learning. This would diminish the dichotomy between IaH and mobility, allowing for a “both/and” rather than an “either/or” approach. Any such mental shift is never easy, and making this happen will require subtle leadership by international officers and more visible championing of IaH by faculty members.

Leadership at Many Levels

Enduring academic change requires strong faculty leadership as well as visible rhetorical and practical support from the top. Putting greater emphasis on IaH requires new thinking about what students need to learn and what goes on in an individual professor’s classroom. Administrative fiat may result in some level of compliance, but they rarely produce shifts in thinking or the belief that the new approach is anything but a passing fad. By the same token, change supported by a few faculty champions rarely

gets enough traction to spread. Faculty need to be encouraged by the support, resources, and policy changes that administrators can provide. In short, an accelerated course for IaH will require an articulate group of faculty leaders who are encouraged by vigorous institutional support.

Collective as Well as Individual Action

The infamous silos of academe and the lack of collective ownership of the curriculum, sometimes even within academic departments, have resulted, in many institutions, in a curriculum that is not greater than the sum of its parts. Professors own their courses, and departments may or may not provide a study program that is coherent, progressing in a such a way that students build on prior knowledge and connect the concepts from one course to another.

Just as a fragmented curriculum is largely due to the lack of collective ownership, the inability to integrate IaH into the curriculum and campus life in a systematic way can be largely attributed to a lack of collective action. Internationalizing specific courses is certainly a good idea, but it will not ensure that students will gain global knowledge or intercultural skills throughout their studies. Similarly, a smattering of international research projects will enhance the quality of those particular efforts, but will likely have no effect on others.

The curricular and extracurricular changes required by IaH will require collective examination of current curricula and campus life, developing a shared sense of goals and direction, and agreement on a shared course of action that provides broad commonalities and at the same time allows each faculty member and administrator to achieve those goals in an autonomous fashion.

A Positive Agenda

Most institutions aspire to produce globally literate and competent graduates—a goal that should resonate especially today. In a world roiled by COVID-19, perilous inequality, and growing nationalism and xenophobia, institutions need to be, and be seen as, beacons of progress and hope. The pandemic represents an opportunity for institutions and their faculty and administrators to make a strong statement to students and the public about their values and their contributions to society. IaH represents an important strategy to make such a statement and has the potential of rallying wide support.

While COVID-19 may present a window of opportunity for IaH, without seizing the moment, new language and sense of purpose, and commitment and leadership at many institutional levels, progress is likely to continue to be slow and IaH will remain a low priority. It is an ambitious change, requiring many faculty members to think differently about their disciplines and courses, and administrators to develop a different frame of reference for the workings of the institutions and of the relationship between IaH and mobility. The challenge is great, but the opportunity is there for the taking. ▲

In a world roiled by COVID-19, perilous inequality, and growing nationalism and xenophobia, institutions need to be, and be seen as, beacons of progress and hope.

Madeleine F. Greene is senior fellow at the International Association of Universities and chair of the board of directors of the International Student Exchange Program (ISEP).