

AIDS and Higher Education

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HIV/AIDS is an issue that higher education institutions, above all universities, must take seriously. The many young people at such institutions fall within the age range where the likelihood of HIV transmission is high. Globally, 11.8 million people between the ages of 15 and 24 were estimated to be living with HIV/AIDS at the end of 2001. In addition, more than half of all new adult infections—about 6,000 each day—occur among young people in this age group. The densest concentration of infected and at-risk young people is found in developing countries, but the number living with HIV in industrialized countries is sufficiently large to alert higher education institutions to the possibility of extensive HIV occurrence and transmission among their students.

The long lead time between the initial HIV infection and the development of AIDS may mask what is happening. The duration of normal academic or training programs means that AIDS often does not manifest itself in HIV-infected students. As universities in Africa know only too well, however, the cruel reality is revealed in the premature death of recent graduates. Thus, the University of Natal has found that 30 percent of its graduate nurses may die within three years of completing their studies. Clearly this is something that effectively nullifies a major aspect of higher education's contribution to the needs of society.

Higher Education's Mandate

HIV/AIDS is also a relevant issue because of higher education's pivotal role within the knowledge economy and position as a crucial agent for change. Higher education's service to society is based on the ability to accumulate, transmit, develop, disseminate, and make use of knowledge. The presence of HIV/AIDS in a society does not change higher education's mandate. However, the powerful threat of a disease that is so universal and takes such a human toll means that every higher education institution must recognize that HIV/AIDS adds specific challenges to its mandate. The issue of HIV/AIDS should enter into every facet of an institution's business, especially its core task of knowledge transmission (teaching), knowledge generation (research), and knowledge sharing (engagement with society).

As agents for change and providers of leadership to society, higher education institutions have acted significantly and decisively in bringing about social change. In South Africa, for instance, universities played a vital role in bringing down the oppressive apartheid regime, and in many parts of the world they continue to play a similar role as they speak out on behalf of democracy and freedom. In this tradition, the "Consensus Statement on Antiretroviral Treatment for AIDS in Poor Countries," issued by individual members of the faculty of Harvard University, was a catalyst in the global effort to fight the disease.

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Specific Responses

Higher education's response to HIV/AIDS should encompass four areas. First, it should ensure that institutions remain focused on the disease and its effects. Staff and students need to be protected against infection or have access to the necessary support, care, and treatment if already infected. Meeting these challenges will require policies governing the admission, progress, and performance of students; rules and procedures governing medical insurance, sick leave, loans, benefits, and pensions; occupational safety procedures for students, academic staff, and support staff; the availability of health, counseling, and testing services; and the mobilization of the whole campus community—students, staff, and ethnic, religious, and interest groups—in the common struggle against the disease.

Second, higher education should aim at ensuring that every graduating student is AIDS-competent, with a theoretical and practical understanding of the epidemic, in relation to the specific program career path. Graduates should be equipped with a mature understanding of the epidemic and the tools and skills for dealing with it in their areas of professional expertise. Responding to this need requires integrating the HIV/AIDS issue into teaching programs, not only in the biomedical and pure sciences but also in the social sciences.

The third area involves the search for a cure and for treatment of the disease. This calls for higher education to apply its research potential to improving the

biomedical and social understanding of HIV / AIDS and ways of dealing with it. Society expects higher education to direct its skilled human resources toward understanding the disease in all its dimensions. The hope is that the newly generated knowledge will lead to solutions, interventions, and programs that will contribute to rolling back the progress of the epidemic.

Finally, higher education should work with public and private agencies and with individuals to confront the destructive power of the epidemic. Higher education needs to provide the knowledge and understanding and draw upon the hands-on experiences of agencies, communities, and individuals to identify and solve the problems that need to be addressed.

The bottom line for higher education is that it should care about the epidemic both within its own community and in the world. One day history will judge the adequacy of higher education's response in the face of the most devastating catastrophe that humanity has ever experienced.

A Decade of Transatlantic Cooperation

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In 1993, a pilot program was started to promote transatlantic cooperation between institutions of higher education in the countries of the European Union (EU) and the United States. This pilot program became an actual one in 1995 and was soon followed by a similar EU-Canada program. Ten years later, it is time to look at the rationales behind these initiatives and see if the objectives are still valid in the present context of ongoing European integration under the Bologna process.

Objectives

In the course of preparing the EU-U.S. pilot program, several experts, including the author, were invited by the European Commission to take part in a meeting to discuss the format of the program.

A number of other programs exist linking higher education in the EU to the rest of the world—such as the Alfa program for Latin America, the Medcampus program for the Mediterranean region, and the Asia Link program. One of the relevant factors pointed out at the meeting was the ongoing active cooperation in higher

education between the United States and Europe, both in student and faculty mobility and in research. Thus, a new program would be able to build upon long existing ties and exchanges. The same would to a great extent be true for Canada.

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Given the large numbers of students moving back and forth between the two continents, the main objective would not involve student mobility but rather developing new types of cooperation and enhancing existing relationships by overcoming bureaucratic obstacles. The recognition and portability of credits should be tried as a way of furthering cooperation.

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Another recommendation discussed at the meeting was increased cooperation at the graduate level and in areas and disciplines in which traditionally only research collaboration existed—such as the sciences, law, and engineering. Another area requiring enhancement would be cooperation between community colleges in the United States and the nonuniversity sector in the EU. All these ideas would be reflected in the EU-U.S. pilot program.

Rationales

The main push for cooperation and mobility in higher education between the United States and Europe started after World War II. Previously, the movement of students and faculty occurred mainly from the United States to Europe, but after 1945 most individual mobility was directed from Europe to the United States. Much of the movement from the United States to Europe continues to be at the undergraduate level and in organized junior-year or semester abroad programs.

The emergence of the United States as a superpower after World War II and the Cold War created a need for the United States to learn more about the world. Funding for exchange programs and international curriculum programs was established—such as Fulbright scholarships for student and faculty exchanges and Title VI for area studies and foreign-language