



Measuring Success in Internationalization: What are Students Learning?

November 2012

Madeline F. Green

Over the past 30 years, various blue-ribbon commissions, association reports and studies have highlighted U.S. students' woeful lack of foreign language competency and literacy about world geography, politics, and history. The events of September 11, 2001, gave new urgency to the message, providing a wake-up call about the importance of educating Americans about the rest of the world and our inextricably entwined fates. This is not to say that U.S. higher education has been totally inactive with respect to internationalization. Many institutions have had long-standing international partnerships and study abroad programs, and have hosted impressive numbers of international students over time. Yet, rarely are institutional internationalization efforts strategic or coherent, or considered to be central to their academic mission or definition of quality. As is always the case, there is tremendous variation in the quantity, quality, and coherence of internationalization across campuses. But as the race to internationalize intensifies, it becomes all the more important to proceed with intentionality.

For most institutions, "success" in internationalization is judged by a series of widely-used indicators of institutional performance, such as numbers of students going abroad, numbers of international students, or courses offered with an international or global focus. And as institutions around the world take up the challenge of internationalization, a robust literature has emerged outlining institutional indicators that help institutions judge their progress as well as to benchmark (see for example www.impi-project.eu, www.impi-toolbox.eu, www.nuffic.nl/international-organizations/services/quality-assurance-and-internationalization; www.nuffic.nl/mint, <http://www.iau-aiu.net/content/iau-global-surveys>.)

What these institutional activities mean for student learning is a different matter. Although many institutions cite producing "global citizens" as a goal, few have a clear set of learning outcomes associated with this label, a map of the learning experiences that produce such learning, or an assessment plan in place to determine whether they have achieved their goals. Clearly, institutional performance and the student learning perspectives can be related to each other, but one cannot assume causality in either direction. As anyone who has been engaged in assessing student learning knows all too well, the presence and quality of a given set of institutional activities or the participation rates in various courses or programs do not tell you anything about what students are learning.

The field of education abroad has begun to seriously engage in the question of outcomes. It is no longer deemed acceptable in the field to cite the "it changed my life" argument as the self-evident truth of the positive impact of education abroad. The rapid growth of short-term education abroad programs has put into sharp relief the relationship of the learning achieved in these experiences to different program durations and pedagogies. As students go abroad for shorter periods of time, and are more likely to do so in a faculty-led program in the company of fellow

Viewpoint

www.learningoutcomesassessment.org

U.S. students, it becomes even more important to determine the impact of these experiences on subject-matter learning, increased global awareness, and development of intercultural skills. The same questions must be asked of longer, more conventional programs, for there is no guarantee that “being there” produces learning, let alone “transformation.” The good news is that institutions are taking up this challenge, increasingly using pre-and post-tests, journals, and portfolios to capture student learning in education abroad (for a list of useful research and resources, see <http://www.nafsa.org/resourcelibrary/Default.aspx?id=31791>).

Although education abroad receives a great deal of attention nationally, it is not synonymous with international or global learning. Although it is difficult to estimate the proportion of students who study abroad for credit during their undergraduate year, we do know that only 270,000 students out of more than 20 million enrolled in postsecondary education studied abroad in 2010 (IIE, 2011; NCES, 2012). Thus, the key question for higher education institutions is how the overwhelming majority of students who do not go abroad will learn about the world and develop the intercultural skills they will need as citizens and workers. To address this question, institutions will need to be very clear about what knowledge and capacities students must learn, where and how they will learn them, and what constitutes evidence of such learning.

Many institutions begin this work by including global learning as one or more of their stated goals of liberal education. And they need not reinvent the wheel in crafting a specific set of goals. The Association of American Colleges and Universities includes intercultural learning as one of the 15 essential learning outcomes of its VALUE initiative, (<http://www.aacu.org/leap/vision.cfm>) and also provides specific goals for liberal education and global citizenship (Musil, 2006). The American Council on Education also has also developed a list of global learning goals with institutional examples, drawn from the literature, and categorizing them under knowledge, skills, and attitudes (see Olson, Green, and Hill, 2006). It is important to note, however, that these first steps of stating global learning as a goal and crafting more specific goals are only the beginning of an ongoing process.

Identifying which courses and programs actually enable students to acquire these skills and competencies is more difficult work. Having a global or international requirement as part of the general education sequence is one common way to ensure that every student gets at least a small dose, but certainly not the only one. Institutions also need to look at majors, programs, and individual courses, to map which ones address specific global learning goals.

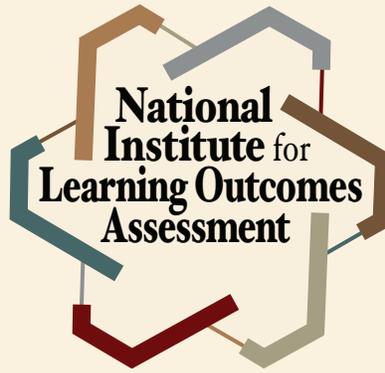
The next step involves assessment. It is through assessment that institutions can find out whether they are really producing “globally competent” graduates, “global citizens,” or graduates who can navigate multicultural situations. And finally, institutions must take the crucial step of “closing the loop” (Banta & Blauch, 2011) by applying what they learned from assessment to improving curriculum and teaching. I recently produced (2012) a detailed guide on steps in assessing global learning and examples of good practice.

As long as success in internationalization is measured largely or solely by institutional performance, colleges and universities will be missing the mark. Although internationalization, alas, is increasingly a matter of numbers, profile, and branding, the real measure of success should be how well students are equipped to live and work in a rapidly changing global environment.

The rapid growth of short-term education abroad programs has put into sharp relief the relationship of the learning achieved in these experiences to different program durations and pedagogies.

References

- Banta, T. W., & Blaich, C. (2011). Closing the assessment loop. *Change: The Magazine for Higher Learning*, 43(1), 22–27.
- Green, M. (2012). *Measuring and assessing internationalization*. Washington, DC: NAFSA: Association of International Educators. Retrieved from www.nafsa.org/epubs
- Institute for International Education (2011). *Open doors 2011: Fast facts*. Retrieved from <http://www.iie.org/en/Research-and-Publications/Open-Doors>
- Musil, C. (2006). *Assessing global learning: Matching good intentions with good practice*. Washington, DC: American Association of Colleges and Universities.
- National Center for Education Statistics (2012). *Fast facts: Enrollment*. Retrieved from <http://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=98>
- Olson, C., Green, M. & Hill, B. (2006). *A handbook for advancing comprehensive internationalization: What institutions can do and what students should learn*. Washington, DC: American Council on Education.



Please Cite As:

Green, M. (2012, November). *Measuring success in internationalization: What are students learning?* Urbana, IL: University of Illinois and Indiana University, National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA).

Follow us on social media:



@NILOA_web



@LearningOutcomesAssessment

Sign up to receive our monthly **NILOA Newsletter** and stay up to date with our research and publications.

