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Without global education, we are ‘America last’

A global education is critical to responding to global challenges. Much of the world understands this, and the US needs to catch up, says Margee Ensign

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Margee M. Ensign (/author/margee-m-ensign)

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Source: iStock

National security concerns make headlines in the US every day: the crisis at our southern border, data breaches, cyberwarfare and unpredictable international actors, just to name a few. But for those of us whose professional lives have positioned us around the globe, it’s clear that another national security issue looms large. Our educational system is failing to prepare students for a globalised society and for the world in which our young people will have to live and thrive. This has potential to undermine effective diplomatic relations, and it diminishes our ability to compete in a global economy. This should be setting off a national security klaxon.

Currently, just 1.6 per cent (https://protect-eu.mimecast.com/s/meANCvZ9gsWpcQkern?domain=nafsa.org) of US students who enrol in higher education take time to study in another country. While some see study abroad as a luxury – nothing more than a pricey tourist jaunt and an opportunity for selfies in exotic locales – those of us who have seen the transformative impact of this international experience know differently.

For most, the experience is life-changing. Students, not tourists, learn intercultural skills and gain the ability to see the US, the world and the challenges we face in new ways and through different lenses. This direct experience is invaluable.

Also worrisome is that, according to the Modern Language Association (https://protect-eu.mimecast.com/s/VCo8CwrRjhLJSqP0b8?domain=mla.org), enrolments in language programmes in US institutions of higher learning dropped by 9.2 per cent from 2013 to 2016. If we look at 2016 enrolments compared with 2009 enrolments, the drop is more than 15 per cent.

Consider another worrisome fact: colleges and universities have cut more than 650 foreign language programmes in the past three years. Nationally, only about half of US students study another language at some point in their school careers. In comparison, 90 per cent of European students study another language.

Global and intercultural competency is vital to developing our next generation of leaders, who will navigate us through complex times. Business is multinational. Security threats – from those posed by extremist groups to those posed by climate change – are transnational. Negotiating tomorrow's trade agreements, dealing with humanitarian crises and devising effective military strategies require individuals with deep intercultural competence. To address such challenges, educated leaders must work together on a worldwide scale.

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Commitment to global education – producing globally literate leaders – should be embedded in the core of every college and university in the US. It should not be a surface-level promise, merely words in a mission, vision, values statement or strategic planning document. And it should certainly not be a money grab, valuing foreign students as opportunities for revenue more so than the diversity of knowledge and experiences they add to the student body.

Likewise, it is critically important to reduce barriers to international students (https://protect-eu.mimecast.com/s/hklQCx17GIJnUYdZ1-?domain=insidehighered.com) and faculty who wish to study and continue their research on US campuses. All students – international and US – benefit from hearing different perspectives, making cross-cultural friendships, and learning how to communicate with people from different cultures.

While it may seem prudent to make our education available only to those who can pay for it, educating and building relationships with students from developing areas of the world will be vital to solving our future challenges. Chinese students study English on a massive scale, and the Chinese government provides thousands of higher education scholarships to African students. Meanwhile, international student numbers in Canada are on the rise. Clearly, other countries understand that welcoming these students will pay important dividends in the future. We need to catch up.

Senators Dick Durbin (D-IL), Roger Wicker (R-MS) and Patrick Leahy (D-VT) recently introduced bipartisan legislation (https://www.nafsa.org/policy-and-advocacy/what-we-stand-for/senator-paul-simon-study-abroad-program-act) to combat our devastating level of global illiteracy – of which the decline of foreign language learning is perhaps an early warning signal.

The Senator Paul Simon Study Abroad Act, championed by the international educators association NAFSA, incentivises US institutions to make study abroad an integral part of higher education. This would be done by creating a modest programme of grants for universities. It is a good start, and it demands unwavering support by all who value global literacy in the US educational system.

American colleges and universities must focus on this need to far better prepare our students for life in the 21st century. And we should partner with the US government to do far more to attract and aid students from abroad who want to study here.

Our future security and our leadership position in the world will depend on how well we do our jobs. If we eviscerate global education, we become "America last".

Margee M. Ensign is president of Dickinson College (https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/dickinson-college), which was recently recognised by NAFSA with its 2019 Senator Paul Simon Award for Comprehensive Internationalization, becoming the only college in the US to win the award twice.

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#1 Submitted by pcarring_cscc_edu on August 5, 2019 - 9:23pm

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