

**Globalizing the Liberal Arts:
Talk given at the conference on Globalizing the Liberal Arts
Soka University, June 2018**

**Adam Weinberg
President
Denison University**

Education and Inspiring Global Citizens

How might we globalize the liberal arts in ways that educates, inspires, and prepares our students for global citizenship. We all believe that liberal arts colleges are uniquely suited to the task of helping undergraduates develop the capability and desire to collaborate on complex problems that span diverse cultural perspectives and defy national boundaries, or at least render them meaningless. We know that our commitment to teaching and the mentoring helps students develop the skills, values, and habits required to respond to the challenges facing our societies. We want our students to care about things bigger than themselves – issues and topics and events occurring beyond the boundaries of their daily lives. We need them to have the capacity to work effectively with others - across differences and perhaps over long periods of time - to address the complex issues that will define the next 100 years of human history. To achieve these ends, we understand that we must continue to globalize the liberal arts.

A starting place, for me, is establishing some sort of meta framing. Here, I want to paraphrase some wonderful thoughts shared with me by Professor Ahmed Samatar of Macalester College, who visited Denison in April. During his visit, Professor Samatar drew a distinction between “small” and “big” liberal arts colleges.

“Small” liberal arts colleges are at odds with the aims of globalization and antithetical to the work we are doing. “Small” liberal arts colleges are insular, narrow in focus, and shrinking in every respect. By contrast, the notion of a “big” liberal arts college encompasses the imagination and aspirations of the best elements of liberal learning. “Big” liberal arts colleges are outward looking. You feel it through their construction of space. The physical plant and the grounds are well designed, well kept, and always expanding. Everybody, from faculty to alumni and parents, is devoted to the college as life-long stakeholders. “Big” liberal arts colleges convey palpable energy and spirit across campus that creates a distinct identity, a sense of place and institutional pride. Engaged students study with faculty who mentor and expose them to emerging issues in various fields of study and push them to go farther, to dig deeper, and to achieve more. At “big” liberal arts colleges, the pursuit of ideas is coupled with a cultivation of civic consciousness about the common fate of fellow citizens, and the larger human race. A “big” liberal arts college is, to quote Professor Samatar “a leader, eager to imagine new and alluring innovations that could enhance the fundamental mission of liberal learning -- that is, an effective combination of accumulating wisdom or insight with appropriate application.” And a place where “the culture of the college is infused at once with attention to the local exigences as well as to cosmopolitan or

internationalist imperatives, initiatives, and habits.”

In essence, I think this notion of being “big” is what the project of globalization is all about. We are striving to make our liberal arts colleges “big” and to avoid being “small.” We seek to be more expansive in our world view, more open to new ideas and different approaches, more outwardly engaged, and more welcoming in all respects. For the last few decades, we have worked, and continue to work, to make our campuses more diverse, more intellectual, and more international. These efforts are succeeding in notable ways. We are seeing positive results and have much to be proud of. But there is still lots to do and a great deal of work left in front of us.

While, globalization will play itself out differently from campus to campus depending on institutional culture, the range and quantity of available resources, location, and leadership, I believe there are fundamental principles that can and should drive the work across all of our campuses.

These principles are as follows:

Globalization has to be woven throughout everything the college does.

On too many campuses, globalization is defined by a signature program or an academic center that houses “global efforts.” If we are to succeed, globalization cannot be relegated to being just another program we offer. Globalization must be a principle that guides everything we do. We cannot imagine our students graduating from our colleges without honing the reading, writing and critical thinking skills. The expectations are embedded, automatic, almost unconsciously practiced. Global thinking/learning needs to evolve into something so automatic too. There is a lot to say about this principle alone, so let me focus on the major points:

To be global, we have to *be* global. This starts with the people on our campuses. Doing some research recently, I was struck by how small the international student numbers remain at many top liberal arts colleges. Often it is less than 10%, and that population is not very global as it tends to skew to a few countries. The same is true for the international representation within the ranks of faculty and staff. To be truly global, we need a broad mix of students, faculty and staff which might mean rethinking how we recruit students, faculty and staff.

Likewise, we need to extend the global reach of our academic programs beyond the typical departments and courses. Most of us have some sort of International Studies program, and many of our academic departments have added more globally oriented courses. But, if we look closely, global education still clumps in certain academic departments with certain faculty and in certain courses. We need to think bigger and push beyond established disciplinary frameworks. For example: what role could and should our core and general education curriculum play? How might the sciences play a greater role in helping students dive deeper into global issues? How does the global influence our thinking about teaching and learning across the social sciences and humanities? Where is the global DNA [already] hiding in our majors, our core curricula and GE that we cannot see? How do we think about honing the craft of teaching with a global lens, even when it might seem awkward?

Beyond the curriculum, we need to take a hard look at every part of campus. How can student activities and athletics and civic engagement and arts programs embrace globalization? Where do we look to recruit coaches and athletes – where do teams travel? How do we construct and shape and support service and community-based work opportunities for students? What do we write about in our alumni magazines? What kinds of plays are put on and exhibitions brought to our museums? The potential for globalization of co-curricular programs and activities is enormous but will only be realized if we are intentional and disciplined in our efforts.

The harder work is integrating global components. It is one thing to be global, another to embrace globalization as a core value, and a third thing all together to actually realize the best version of our global ambitions.

For example: our international students are too often isolated on our campuses. We need to do more to support them and to help foster cross-cultural engagement on our campuses. Beginning with our offers of admission, in our orientation and new student programs, and on through graduation and beyond, we have to become truly inclusive and equitable student communities. I worry that despite our best intentions we often do things that foster – and perhaps even encourage – a sense of separation and isolation in international students. For example: I suspect most of us could take a hard look at Orientation Programs and the first semester of college experience, and find ways to encourage more cross-cultural interactions and friendships within our incoming class.

Another example is our centers for global learning. We need to make sure these centers are fully integrated across campus and function as catalysts for expanding global work beyond the usual people, places and departments – as opposed to islands of internationally focused research and perspectives.

The fixes are not easy. Solutions will vary across our campuses given our unique cultures and resources. At Denison, we are highly focused on residential halls; especially first year halls. We reconstructed our residential program a year ago to create something called Residential Communities – or as it is known on campus [ResComm](#). Our goal is to create residence halls where students learn to live and work effectively across difference, to do public work, and to develop as leaders. We are working to set the tone early, giving our students the skills, values and habits to live in truly diverse and culturally rich settings. We try to encourage every first-year student to use their residential hall to create friendships with students whose life experiences are different from their own.

Reimagining residential living will not in itself make for a truly global experience for students on campus. The truth is that despite all the students who are excited about including global experiences in their education, there is another sizeable subset of students who are tentative, even reluctant to do so. For the majority of our students – particularly American students – global thinking has played little to no part in their primary or secondary education. And even those students who have traveled or studied abroad prior to college, have generally done so in a relatively narrow context, and from an outsider's perspective. So, when they arrive on our campuses many students equate the idea of global education with study abroad – another item on the menu of academic and co-curricular offerings from which they get to choose. And to a two-

sport athlete majoring in mathematics or chemistry or even philosophy, the relevance of global education is not always readily apparent.

That's a failure we have to own and a reality we have to change. And we're going to need to include students in the process of doing so.

For me, a starting point is that globalizing the liberal arts college experience involves more than changing programs and adopting new pedagogies. It means transforming social and cultural structures on campus. And change of this sort requires student buy-in and participation. So, we need to be proactive in bringing students into the work of globalizing our communities. We need to convey the extent to which their education – regardless of the field of study they pursue or post-college goals they have – cannot be complete or meaningful absent immersion in a global context. And we need to listen to and heed their advice about how to bring about effective and meaningful change of this kind to the student experience on campus.

To be global really means global – not just “beyond the United States.”

Too much globalization is focused narrowly on Western Europe. I am not advocating that we ignore Western Europe. But, our global project has to global.

We have been working on this at Denison, but it turns out to be harder than expected. For example: many study abroad providers are focused on Europe and Australia. Parents are more comfortable sending their students to Europe and more students want to go there. To their credit, European universities have become much more international through Erasmus, and other shifts. But, the student centers where we often send our students are not.

To really make progress we need to form more partnerships with our peers. One example is a project started by the Great Lakes College Association called the [Global Liberal Arts Alliance](#) (GLAA) which is a network of 29 liberal arts colleges located in 17 countries. We have been doing everything from linked courses, to faculty and student exchanges, to a variety of joint programs. The GLAA has succeeded in creating strong relationships between a set of Midwestern liberal arts colleges and our peers abroad. But the challenge has been geographic diversity. GLAA efforts remain heavily focused on the United States and Europe. There is some representation from Africa, Asia and the Middle East – though it remains small - and we have struggled to find partners from Central and South America.

Getting beyond this requires creative thinking. We need to continue to devise and develop effective new models for liberal arts colleges to partner with our international peers. But we also need other forms of globalizing. Let me provide two examples:

First, by staying more local we might achieve more global. I have become – at first a reluctant and now a fierce – advocate for study away in addition to study abroad. Within 200 miles of most of our campuses are major cities. For Denison, Columbus is just 25 miles. In Columbus there is a large and growing Somali population and an emerging Middle Eastern community as well. Those communities are interesting and eager to connect with the college. Another example is the US southern border. It is cheaper to fly from Columbus to southwest Texas than many of the places in Europe we currently send students. And spending time along the Southern Border, in places like El Paso, can add tremendously to our students' global understanding.

Second, we might also need to rethink technology. It is important that we move away from treating technology as a barrier to students engaging globally. Rather, we need to embrace the tremendous opportunities technology offers to help students go beyond the borders of our campuses. Technology can help us become more outwardly engaged. Linked courses, for example, can bring our students together with peers from other places that they cannot or will not travel. We are only beginning to scratch the surface of the potential that merging technology with innovative pedagogies presents to expand and enrich global education in the liberal arts setting

All of this suggests a need to redefine “global.” It is not about travel- how far we go in an airplane. It is about the experiences we give our students – the opportunities to explore a range of cultures and attributes in ways that help them develop the skills, values, and habits of effectively working in global ways.

Quality really matters.

Inside Higher Ed recently published an [interesting article](#) by George Kuh and Jillian Kinzie. It was part of a debate about high impact practices (HIP) and when they matter. Global programs are of course among the high impact practices being debated. Kuh and Kinzie state, “simply offering and labeling an activity an HIP does not necessarily guarantee that students who participate in it will benefit in the ways much of the extant literature claims. Over the past few years, we’ve emphasized that implementation quality is critical in terms of realizing the benefits of HIP participation. This is not a surprise as the caveat applies to every effort a college or university makes to engage students in meaningful, relevant learning experiences inside and outside the classroom, on and off the campus.”

As part of this, we need to be sensitive to the false power of the comment we all frequently hear from students who travel or study abroad: “It was the best experience of my life.” Spending time away is amazing. Travel is awesome and most students and faculty come back energized. But, I am not sure “amazing” equals educationally valuable or personally transformative.

I would argue that every global program must have at least two qualities- cultural immersion and academic integrity.

The work of creating global citizens is almost impossible absent deep cultural immersion. Dan Chambliss and Christopher Tackas have a fantastic book called [How College Works](#), where they make the point that people and relationships, not programs and initiatives, change lives. Chambliss and Tackas argue that we spend way too much time focused on creating strategic plans, signature programs, and new initiatives, but nowhere near enough thinking about how we bring people together.

We can debate what makes for a high quality global program. I would argue it starts with deep cultural immersion and suggest we focus on leveraging the emerging diversity of our campuses to make them places that promote immersion and meaningful cross-cultural engagement. Let’s “mix it up” more in our residential halls. Let’s review our study abroad programs and focus more on home-stays and maybe a new generation of better designed direct-enroll programs where students live in residential halls with their international peers.

Likewise, academic integrity and rigor matter a lot. I know we all agree with this in principal, but I suspect if we look hard, there are places where we can improve quality across our global efforts. Every program should have high academic value.

Assets need to be leveraged to effectively scale globalization in ways that are affordable and maintain a high level of quality.

The optimal approach to asset and resource allocation will vary across our institutions – but it is crucial. Globalization is a big project and it can be expensive. Unless we scale with quality – two things that often don’t go hand in hand – we are likely to be left with a collection of nice stories to tell but far too little institutional change.

Let me talk briefly about Denison. Here are three places where we have opportunities:

First, leveraging our location as part of the Columbus metropolitan region. A new highway puts us 30 minutes from downtown Columbus, which has become an increasingly diverse and cosmopolitan city. We are starting to think about a range of ways to use Columbus – taking students to talks by the World Affairs Council, connecting with interesting neighborhoods like our Somali and Middle Eastern communities, recruiting students and staff from Columbus who are recent immigrants, creating internships with companies that have a global focus, and using our proximity to an airport to travel more.

Second, commit to making sure that when we invest in new initiatives, we have a chance to infuse them with global attributes. When Denison moved to develop new academic programs, we started with Global Commerce and *Denison Seminars* – team-taught courses with a travel component. We are investing heavily in a new career center, called the Austin E. Knowlton Center for Career Exploration, where we are building international internships and making sure they are funded from day one so all students can participate without financial barriers.

And third, focus on our growing four-year residential program and the international student population which has recently doubled in size –17% for next year’s entering class. We are committed to ensuring that our campus becomes a site for deep cultural immersion and global learning in classrooms, residential halls, studios, dining halls, and so forth.

Leadership Matters:

None of this will happen without committed leadership from presidents, provost, deans, directors, and department chairs. Globalizing liberal arts colleges will require a willingness to take on “sacred” issues that stand in the way. The signature international program that hasn’t changed in decades and takes up all the air in the room may actually need to be overhauled – or abandoned altogether. Longstanding silos must come down and institutional policies that hamper creativity and thwart innovation have to go. Leadership also means freeing up time for faculty, student development professionals, and others to focus on the global, and making sure they have resources to get things done.

Conclusion:

Those are the five principles:

- Globalization has to be woven throughout everything the college does.
- To be global really means global – not just “beyond the United States.”
- Quality really matters and involves cultural immersion and academic rigor
- Assets need to be leveraged to effectively scale
- Leadership Matters

Together, these five principles give us a set of strategies to embrace the values of “big” and reject the limitations of “small.” Even at healthy liberal arts colleges there is a very real danger of becoming too narrow, too confined – too cautious. For me, the crux of the issue is avoiding being insular and becoming more outwardly focused. Being global is a huge component of making this happen. Hence, this conversation is about much more than “embracing the global” or adding more “global programs” to our campuses. It is about making sure that the colleges we love remain a driving force in higher education. That liberal arts colleges continue to provide the kind of education that students need and deserve. The kind of education that the world needs us to provide to create the next generation of global citizens.