Evaluating Global Education at a Regional University: A Focus Group Research on Faculty Perspectives

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Abstract

The main focus of this study is to assess students' level of global competency at a public university in the Northeast region of the United States. The three dimensions of global competency: global awareness, global citizenship and global competitiveness / cooperation were the main focus of this research. Based on a "snowball sampling method" a total of twelve faculty members who are full time professors at the university were selected and invited to participate in focus group research to assess students' knowledge and skills in regards to global competency. The findings of this study reveal that most students lack motivation to explore global issues. Additionally, they do not possess sufficient information and knowledge related to the three dimensions of global competency. The study concluded that various cultural and institutional barriers have contributed to low levels of global competency among students.

Introduction

It is a widely held consensus among leaders in higher education institutions and policy decision makers that global education is a necessity for college students today (Hovland & Schneider, 2011; Haring-Smith, 2011; Reimer, 2009). With the advancement of communication technology, expanding global trade, and intensified global conflicts and social change, it is imperative to prepare college students to become globally competent in an ever complex global environment. According to Reimer (2009), global competency refers to "the knowledge and skills that help people understand the flat world in which they live, the skills to integrate across disciplinary domains to comprehend global affairs and events, and the intellect to create possibilities to address them…[it] also includes fostering an attitude that makes it possible to interact peacefully,

respectfully, and productively with fellow human beings from diverse geographies (25)." Skills and knowledge such as foreign languages and the ability to understand and critically reflect on global issues are of essence of today's global education. This study examines the question of whether or not colleges and universities are effectively preparing students to become globally competent citizens.

This study assesses students' level of global competency in the setting of a public funded, regional university. The three elements of global competency under discussion are (1) Global awareness: knowledge of global affairs and the ability to discuss and reflect on issues in today's global context. (2) Global citizenship: understanding of responsible citizenship and the action one takes to meet the challenges in global community and (3) Global competitiveness and cooperation: professional knowledge and training to compete and work with other nationalities in the global work force. We invited college professors employed in the university to assess and explain the level of global awareness and knowledge among college students. Although a significant amount of literature on global education based their analysis on the student body, mainly through the use of surveys, this study relies on faculty's assessment of global education. We believe that college professors are in a unique position to evaluate the level of global cultural awareness and knowledge among college students. Faculty members possess broad perspectives on global issues and current affairs. With their close student contact, faculty members have first-hand knowledge about their students. Additionally, faculty members have expertise in discipline specific knowledge and therefore will be able to discuss "expectations" of global awareness and knowledge for undergraduate students in general and academic disciplines specifically. Faculty members can also identify and critically reflect on issues in academic curriculum and university resources and provide directions in order to enhance global cultural literacy education.

We asked college professors, based on their years of experiences working with undergraduate students, to evaluate whether or not college graduates possess sufficient understanding and awareness of global issues to enable them to think critically of the world they live in and to empower them to be an active citizen in the global society. Are college graduates equipped with sufficient knowledge and skills to

compete and work with other internationals? If not, what factors contribute to the lack of global awareness and knowledge among college students? Lastly, we asked faculty members to address deficiencies, weakness, or gaps in developing a comprehensive global education at the institutional level. The current paper will explore specifically cultural barriers that hinder global cultural acquisition. We focus on three aspects of barriers: cultural capital, media influence, and societal constrains and institutional culture.

Research Methods

The research adopts a focus group approach in which unstructured interviews and guided conversations are based on a set of standardized open-ended questions (Chamblis and Schutt, 2010). Focus group research, as a qualitative method, enables participants to elaborate and engage in dialogues with one another in aspects relating to global cultural literacy. Snowball sampling, which selects participants based on personal references and existing social networks, is used to select faculty participants. Although the study does not intend to make references to the population, we have strived to have a diverse sample with faculty from various colleges and disciplines, as well as, faculty with an international background. These faculty members represent Arts and Letters, Social Sciences, Sciences, Business and Education. Additionally, half of the focus group participants are international faculty members. A total of twelve faculty members who are full time professors at the university participated in the focus group. After agreeing to participate in the study, the researchers provided some information about the study and the consent form to the faculty volunteers. Thus, the participants learned about the study, its objectives and the nature of their participation. The consent form, signed by the participants, assured confidentiality and anonymity. Each focus group discussion included four members, the researchers and two volunteer faculty. The participants were notified that the focus group interview / discussion was being tape-recorded with a digital recorder. After collecting the signed consent forms, the session began with casual conversations and was then directed by the researchers based on the questions related to the main topic of the study. The researchers followed the scripted questions and attempted to maintain the focus and structure of the discussions. In some cases the conversations became very lively and heated. All the discussions

were later transcribed, and the researchers reviewed the transcripts to find the main themes discussed in the focus group discussions without identifying any faculty involved in the study.

Table 1 Sample characteristics

Characteristics	f
Discipline	
Arts and Letters	5
Social Sciences	3
Sciences	1
Business	1
Education	2
Background	
International	6
Native/American	6
Sex	
Male	7
Female	5

Data Analysis: Cultural Barriers

Every single professor in the focus group commented that students lack basic knowledge of global societies. For example, while the U.S. is involved in two wars, students do not know the geographic location of the countries involved. According to one faculty member, students cannot make the connections among the countries and do not fully understand the implication of the wars on the U.S. and other countries.. In addition, students in general do not follow current events and news on global issues and affairs; they do not read (enough) national/international credited news outlets such as the *New York Times* or *The Washington Post*. In other words, students are not exposed wide and deep enough to worldly issues. "This generation is being described as 'low information voters' because of their lack of perspectives on issues," commented a professor. What concerns professors the most; however, is student's lack of interests and desires to learn global issues and affairs. One example given by a faculty member is on the Israel and Palestine conflict. Not only are students unfamiliar with the different perspectives in the conflict, they also show no curiosity in finding out the roots and the

context of this conflict in order to understand why some Palestinians engage in terrorist acts. Another professor commented that some students even showed hostility and resistance toward learning cultural and historical issues while taking a language course. She commented that language cannot be separated from its historical, cultural, and social contexts. It is important for students to develop historical and cultural sensitivity and understand why they should care about global societies.

To explain students' lack of interests and ability to engage in global knowledge acquisition and to develop global competency, we focus on several cultural roots in the society and in the higher education institution: cultural capital, media influence, and (higher education) institutional culture.

Cultural Capital

From a Sociological point of view, individual's experiences are deeply rooted in his/her social positions, including socioeconomic background and cultural upbringings. Cultural capital refers to the "symbolic and interactional resources that people use to their advantage in various situations" (Bourdieu, in Conley, 2011:496.) In the context of this research, we consider cultural capital as resources in a family, school or community to cultivate an individual's global cultural orientations and interests in his/her upbringing and learning process. It includes not only physical resources (skills, credentials, etc.), but also one's overall ability and confidence in conducting oneself and dealing with others in various settings (Conley, 2011). Some measures of cultural capital include parent's educational background, their working and traveling experiences, their interests in global cultures, their ability to speak a second language, as well as, interests and respects to other cultural knowledge.

Few empirical studies test the relationship between cultural capital and global orientations and interests. One recent study explored student's decision to study abroad. The benefits of studying abroad have long been established in the literature. Studies show that students gain global competency in areas of foreign language acquisition, cross-cultural communication and awareness, and personal growth (see literature review in Salisbury, et al., 2009). Salisbury, et al. (2009) suggested that a complex interplay between factors influences the predisposition of undergraduate students to study abroad.

Although socioeconomic status clearly influences the intent to study abroad, social and cultural capital set parameters for student's decisions. Salisbury, et al. (2009) hypothesized that social and cultural capital, i.e., one's beliefs, attitudes, and values in the home or school environment, have an impact on perceived educational importance of study abroad, travel experiences, level of global awareness, language skills, and the ability for one to maneuver in a different cultural setting. Based on a large set of data of over 4000 undergraduate students in 19 higher education institutions, the study found that students from lower socioeconomic background with a low level of pre-college social and cultural capital, even when provided with full financial assistance to study abroad, were less likely to study abroad. The same result was found among students from higher socioeconomic background but with a low level of social and cultural capital.[1] The author concluded that "initiatives to increase study abroad participation should broaden their focus beyond efforts to simply alleviate direct costs. If students don't intend to study abroad, they are not likely to ever investigate whether financial assistance exists (Salisbury, et al., 2009:138.)"

In the current study, we have also found evidence supporting the link between cultural capital and global competency in general and study abroad specifically. First of all, financial strain is a critical factor in study abroad given the financial background of students in the public supported institution under investigation; many students simply cannot afford to study abroad. However, as one professor who regularly conducts a study abroad program argued, despite the support from the university (i.e., generous travel and living cost coverage and scholarship opportunities), students simply do not consider study abroad as a priority, or even an option in their study plan. Many professors pointed that there is a lack of interests, motivation or desire to study abroad in the general student body. Even when the select few show interests and curiosity, they tend not to act proactively to realize the study abroad plan. The reasons lie deeper than the practical consideration of study abroad – the cultural capital.

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[1] Salisbury et al. (2009) described cultural capital as "an individual's cultural knowledge, language skills, educational credentials and school-related information, derived largely from their parents' class status (123)" based on Bourdieu's work. The concept was measured by parent's postsecondary education attainment, student's educational aspiration of obtaining a post baccalaureate degree, an attitude toward literacy scale, a high school involvement scale, and an openness to diversity scale. The measures however did not properly distinguish between the concepts of social capital and cultural capital.

One indication stems from the socio-geographic locations where our students are from. A professor commented that the lack of knowledge and motivation of learning global knowledge stems from the prevalence of a "parochial culture," a culture that is rooted in the rural Pennsylvania communities where the large number of our students come from. The cultural resources of these communities tend to be predominately homogenous (white, rural, lacking diversity and cross-cultural presence) and locally oriented. Another professor observed that even among students, there seems to be a mental division between students from PA and NJ/NY. It is commonly observed that NJ students seem to be more open minded than local students from Northeast PA because they are from an area that has greater diversity and is in a close proximity to the NY metropolitan culture. On the other hand, PA students embrace a "self- hate manner" that they are just from small towns in rural PA. Despite the close proximity to New York City, many students have never traveled there, let alone traveled overseas. In addition, the percentage of Caucasian and first-generation college students is high (around 90%), which speaks to students' home environments (lack of cultural capital and with less generous financial means). From the point of view of cultural acquisition, an aware, open-minded person should start with immersion of oneself into the diverse culture in the domestic environment. In other words, students who lack access to cultural capital may not appreciate the significance of study abroad experiences specifically and global awareness in general.

Media and Social Media

Students have access to an exploding amount of information at their finger tips, whether it is through conventional media outlets such as TV and radio, or new communication technology such as web pages, blogs or social media. Media content, as well as, platforms will certainly shape student's perspectives and attitudes toward global events. We question whether media in general and social media specifically serve as efficient tools to acquire global knowledge.

All faculty members in this study assert that most students lack motivations exploring global issues and do not possess sufficient information and knowledge on global issues. In fact, many students are not even concerned with what is happening in domestic politics, for example, the Obama care in the Supreme Court. Faculty members

contend that this problem is deeply rooted in the micro culture that students live in. One aspect in the micro culture is a limited (predominately American) cultural perspective. When accessing media information, students consent to media without confirming information or seeking out different cultural explanations presented in alternative media outlets. There seems to be little desire to seek alternative perspectives specifically from non-American media outlets, not even BBC. As a consequence, student's viewpoints on global issues and affairs are heavily shaped by American media. One example is the cultural bias against Muslim women. Students assume that all cultures in the Middle East are homogenous and women are oppressed in Muslim culture.[2] Comparatively, college students in other societies are expected to be able to read journal articles in English or even in other languages, and are more open to other cultural perspectives, based on the observation of many international faculty members.

Another aspect of media culture is derived from the use of new communication technology and social media. We argue that these new media forms reinforce local/national focuses, rather than expanding cross-cultural perspectives. Supposedly social media such as Facebook should create a platform that helps connect people and provides opportunities for sharing important information. For example, news sites can easily be incorporated into Facebook and can draw a discussion with others. However, faculty members from across disciplines argue that students are not benefiting from social media in the aspect of acquiring global knowledge. Quite on the contrary, student's major interests lie in films, music and celebrities in a local/national context. These popular culture contents consume student's time and energy. As a result, student's connection reinforces a rather narrow focus in life. Indeed, a faculty reports that the only exception is in the area of sports. Students, especially students in related sports disciplines/programs, show great interests in international sports events (soccer, Olympic games, etc.) and have solid knowledge of international teams and players, often through outlet such as ESPN.

Institutional Culture

In our current economy, higher education institutions are increasingly adapting to a

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[2] A similar observation can be found in Lutz (2010).

for-profit, business model. To meet the "bottom line", colleges and universities are expanding class sizes, cutting faculty members and elective courses, and underfunding activities. With less support to teaching and learning, students are negatively affected in such an institutional setting.

In addition, there is a major emphasis on job creation and practical orientation of college education. On the one hand, this appears to be a positive move since college education must prepare students for the labor force. On the other hand, faculty members worry that this emphasis has led to an institutional culture that promotes a utilitarian view of knowledge. For example, students are reluctant to take a second language course unless we require it. Even for students who are willing to take the course, they are doing so for utility purposes – to give them an edge to find a job, not for educational experience per se. Even though global education fits into the emphasis of job creation, colleges and universities must commit financially to build global education programs for all disciplines. It is essential for new faculty, second language courses and study abroad programs to be funded. Career services must also help students consider entering the global work force and envision themselves working in a different country.

Conclusion

The focus group research involving faculty from various disciplines reveals students' low competency in relation to global awareness, global citizenship, global competitiveness and cooperation. The review of previous studies related to this topic and the faculty participants' disciplinary expertise attest to the importance of global education, both at the conceptual level and pragmatic level. Considering the rapid pace of globalization (economically, politically and culturally) partly due to the widespread use of the internet and satellite TV / radio, it seems imperative for the U. S. students to become globally competent. They must be able to apply their education and learned knowledge to understand the interconnectedness of various global forces and the impact on their own lives (Hovland & Schneider, 2011; Haring-Smith, 2011; Reimer, 2009). It has become a common practice for many private liberal arts colleges and universities to integrate such curriculum and experiences in their programs and policies, such as travel abroad opportunities for their students. But because of some institutional limitations, many public universities have not followed the same trends. Additionally, at

public universities, students' cultural backgrounds may function as barriers for a students' global education, since many of them are first generation college students, and in some cases, come from rural areas (Salisbury, et al. 2009).

Although with some limitations, this study has attempted to address these important issues related to students' global competency at a public university. Since our research was based on focus group interviews / discussions of a sample of twelve faculty, we need to include more faculty from various disciplines and, similarly conduct focus group interviews with students. Our research also needs to incorporate other forms of data such as quantitative assessment data collected by the university's *Office of Institutional Effectiveness* to corroborative the findings of this study.

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