

## *Engaging Global Realities*

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N EARLY A CENTURY AGO, Henry Adams tried to trace what he had learned over the course of a lifetime dedicated to education. And by education, he meant not simply formal study but all his efforts – including involvement in the world of affairs – to understand as much of his universe as possible.

By the end of his odyssey, he felt that he had largely failed. There was simply too much to comprehend. Too many changes were happening too rapidly, and nearly all the forces were centrifugal.

Adams was certainly right in believing that, in his words, the “multiple” would become a dominant part of our twentieth-century reality, and that we would have to take that fact into account in any design for education.

But we are not likely today to think that any single educational design might “fit” all or even most individuals. And we have probably come to accept (more than Adams did) the idea that multiplicity is and will remain a fundamental part of our experience.

I want to discuss several topics that bear on the theme of

## Thinking Internationally

multiplicity. Each represents a significant challenge for higher education. None can be definitively “solved.” But each can be addressed in ways that can strengthen our institutions – both as centers of teaching and research, and as human communities.

I would like to highlight a few of the major changes that are taking place in national and international affairs. The question in this case is how we should organize (or reorganize) our educational agenda to take these changes into better account.

Recent studies suggest that we are a less trusting people than we used to be. We are more inclined to be suspicious of our government and indeed of many established institutions and professions. We even trust our neighbors less. We also vote less. Fewer of us join community and neighborhood organizations. Volunteerism is still a vital American tradition, but we are now more likely to write checks and donate money than we are to invest blood, sweat, or tears in support of activities and causes that matter to us.

All of this represents a major change from the immediate post-World War II decades, when participation rates in virtually all civic associations were higher. The Cold War may have bifurcated the world then, but within our own sphere we tended to believe that consensus, based on mutual trust, was a desirable and largely achievable goal. In fact, one of our greatest national concerns was the problem of too much conformity and dull conventionality: those were the days of *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*, *The Organization Man*, *The Status Seekers*, and *The Lonely Crowd*.

The titles of several recent books dramatize what has happened: *The Clash of Civilizations*, *Democracy and Disagreement*, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*, *Democracy and Its Discontents*, and Senator Moynihan’s pithy little volume, with its understated rubric, *Pandæmonium*.

In short, multiplicity and fragmentation are major themes that are clearly in evidence. Nor is this simply an American phenomenon. The English philosopher Stuart Hampshire concluded his latest book, *Innocence and Experience*, by stating that “life consists in perpetual conflicts between rival impulses and ideals.”

Has the shift to a world that sometimes seems full, in the

## *Engaging Global Realities*

words of Isaiah Berlin, of “intolerable choices” been monolithic? Certainly not. But have the temper and outlook of the times changed, and have some of our presuppositions altered? On the whole, yes.

Moreover, all of us recognize that we are now actors in a drama that has become global in nature. We must take into account powerful new systems and forces that operate fairly autonomously “above” and “through” and “around” the traditional geographic grid of nation-states and regions. This development has obviously not superseded the previous structure. The two coexist, and together they create a set of dynamics that are far more complex, more difficult to identify, to trace, to describe, and to understand, let alone to control.

Economic capital flows electronically, twenty-four hours a day. Ideas, information, and disinformation move equally quickly to many more places, and from an incalculably greater number of sources, than ever before. Different phenomena – including various forms of religious fundamentalism, the shift to open markets and free trade, or the emergence of international terrorism – suddenly appear and seem to spread, in ways we scarcely begin to understand, from nation to nation or region to region.

All of this is simply another way of saying that reality itself is changing, and at an accelerating rate. There are many reasons for this, but the new technologies we now possess play an important role. These technologies make it possible for an unlimited number of events to reverberate instantaneously around the world in real time. As a result, the pace of life quickens. The number of interactions increases. And our ability to identify coherent patterns behind and beyond individual events is tested more severely.

There is, as I said earlier, no way to “solve” the problems I have been describing. The challenge for our colleges and universities is an educational one: how to deepen our understanding of the transformations now under way in the hope that we can then prepare our students and ourselves to live more effective and satisfying lives in the decades ahead.

## *Thinking Internationally*

I want to stress one particular aspect of this broad educational challenge: the need to reexamine the adequacy of our programs in international studies, as well as the international dimensions of our other programs. To what extent do our research and teaching reflect the fact that many events and systems are now global, not merely national or regional, in their scope? What steps should we be taking to achieve a better alignment?

In fact, there is a great deal already happening. For instance, more than 450,000 students from abroad, representing virtually every country or territory on earth, are now in residence at American colleges and universities. A good number of them are undergraduates, but there is strong and growing demand at the graduate and professional level. The largest “sender” nations are located, increasingly, in East and Southeast Asia.

That is the prevailing pattern at my own university. About 6 percent of our undergraduates come from abroad, but in several of our graduate and professional schools – in arts and sciences, government, business, design, and public health – the figure is well over 20 percent. And of our 3,000 full-time foreign students, nearly 1,000 come from Japan, China, and other parts of Asia. Europe, by comparison, sends us about 750 students a year. Meanwhile, a larger number of our American students now wish to work or study overseas: as summer interns, visiting students, young professionals, or simply as interested travelers.

As these figures only begin to suggest, our institutions have already gone far to engage with and come to terms with global realities. And this, in turn, is forcing significant, sometimes unanticipated changes in how we teach and what research we do.

For example, anyone who has visited a professional school class in constitutional law, or medical ethics, or environmental health knows that the presence and participation of talented students from several different countries can immediately change the whole nature of the discussion. Virtually any issue can provoke debate – whether the question involves limits that might be placed on free speech, or a patient’s right to make certain choices

## *Engaging Global Realities*

in medical treatment, or the extent to which all countries should be bound by a single set of environmental health guidelines.

As a result, course materials begin to change, research projects become more complex, and the number of variables that must be taken into account quickly increases. This process is healthy and actually quite effective. But it is not in itself enough: we need a more coordinated and well-supported approach – an updated version of the initiatives launched so successfully in the 1950s and 1960s.

At that time, we created new departments and centers for regional and area studies. Because of that, we now have a reasonable number of professionals in our society who are knowledgeable about regions and nations such as the Middle East, the Far East, Russia, and India – including a knowledge of their languages. Had we not made that earlier investment, our ability to function with any real effectiveness in world affairs today would be far more limited than it is.

If we now want to consider a revised agenda for the coming decades, what are some of the main possible priorities?

First, in spite of all the criticism surrounding this point, we must sustain our commitment to international student and faculty exchange programs. There is no substitute for direct contact with talented people from other countries and cultures. As I have suggested, we benefit enormously from our overseas students. They add to our base of knowledge. They help to drive teaching and research in new and fruitful directions.

Second, we need to create flexible structures to stimulate the study of important topics that transcend the boundaries of individual nations and regions. I have already mentioned such topics in passing, but any one of us could easily expand the list: for example, the problems and obstacles faced by emerging democracies in different parts of the world; or the causes of, and possible resolution of, ethnic or religious conflict in a wide variety of countries; or the attempt to promote economic development in ways that are sensitive to environmental protection.

## *Thinking Internationally*

Some of these subjects are already being taught because they are of special interest to individual faculty members. But we have to build more effective institutional structures to focus more concentrated and sustained attention on these and similar issues.

Finally, while we ourselves have much to learn about the rest of the world, we are also at this particular moment in history in an unusual position to help others. We have the largest and most effective higher educational system in the world, and we have the capacity – at all levels, but especially in professional and graduate education – to offer advanced and mid-career programs that are invaluable to foreign students and their countries, and that are scarcely available elsewhere.

This kind of education in business, public management, urban design, public health, and law, among other fields, is desperately needed in most parts of the world: more and more, our institutions are being asked if we can provide it. Students from abroad who participate in such programs will come to understand America, its people, and its values better. They will also take back to their homelands new insights and capabilities that can make their own institutions and societies more effective: more productive, more stable, more open, and more ready to reach out to become partners in joint enterprises with others.

In a year when we are recognizing the fiftieth anniversary of the Marshall Plan, it is time to reconsider our own international planning in education. Initiatives that focus explicitly on global affairs are now very much in order. And more intensive efforts to provide education – especially professional education – to students from abroad can make a significant difference to our future.

These efforts represent only a modest part of what might be done. But they are an important part, if we want to make the world more whole – a little more of a unity, however much it will also remain a “multiple.”