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Are We Returning to "Multi-culturalism"? How Best to Describe "Local Impact, Global Reach" Initiatives

Jayne M. Comstock, *Butler University*

How Best to Describe "Local Impact, Global Reach" Initiatives

Last week about 2,000 academics from around the country gathered for the AAC&U annual meeting to talk about how we can and should *Reclaim a Democratic Vision for College Learning, Global Engagement, and Success*.

I was proud to be a part of that conversation as one of six representatives from institutions in the New American College and Universities consortium who discussed the importance of integrating the "local in the global and the global in the local" to bring about essential learning outcomes for our students.

Using examples from our institutions, all of us talked about the importance of delivering education that in my words has both "local impact and global reach." Our commitments to civic engagement and global awareness are prominent in our institutional missions, strategic plans, core curricula, academic offerings, co-curricular programs, and extensive study abroad opportunities for students and faculty. I've listed the institutions below so you can check out the best practices we discussed at our session.

What I really want to focus on are two ideas that came out of the lively question-and-answer session after the individual presentations.

One of the session attendees asked us if we had created structures that would sustain the programming that we had just enthusiastically described. She aptly recognized that these initiatives are often associated with particular academic leaders and can easily fade away when leadership changes.

It was a good point, and it got a room full of academic leaders thinking about how best to create solid structures (beyond the mission statement) that would sustain the commitment and funding for civic engagement and global education initiatives. This is an idea that needs to be fleshed out at all institutions that believe quality higher education must include an emphasis on social responsibility and global knowledge. That is, in an institutionally appropriate manner, we all need to find ways to sustain the delivery of education with *local impact and global reach*.

Throughout the discussion, we were careful to include the importance of ensuring that our programming promoted increased understanding of both US domestic diversity and of international cultures. As the discussion unfolded, we captured the essences of the idea that there are global issues in our local cultures, and there are domestic diversity concerns in nearly every global culture, as well.

All of this made me wonder if we had come full circle: In the '80s and early '90s we were talking about "multi-culturalism" — I even wrote a NHS grant for funding to spread multi-cultural issues across the curriculum. Soon thereafter, our vocabulary evolved to the use of the term "diversity," and focused on valuing diversity. And this almost always meant "domestic diversity." About this same time, we also made the transition from talking about "international

education" to "global education." But neither term — "valuing diversity" or "global education" — separately captures the idea that there is global in the local and local in the global.

Recognizing that the made-up word "glocal" is not likely our best option, I am wondering — is it time to revisit the use of the term "multi-cultural" as a term that could capture the interconnections between the global and the local?

When I mentioned this at the session, there was a lot of head nodding. It seemed that many of us knew we needed new language to describe our commitments. After the session, a thoughtful attendee mentioned that, although returning to the use of "multi-cultural" is an intriguing and important matter to continue to ponder, the term may not capture the inter-cultural issues related to gender, sexual orientation, age, etc.

I am still thinking about all of this. And I am curious about your thoughts as well.

The AAC&U , New American Colleges and Universities panel participants included:

- *Thomas Burns*, Provost, Belmont University
- *Jamie Comstock*, Provost, Butler University
- *Thomas Kazee*, President, University of Evansville
- *Steven Michael*, Provost, Arcadia University
- *Thomas Rochon*, President, Ithaca College
- *Terry Weiner*, Provost, The Sage Colleges
- *Charles Taylor*, Vice President for Academic Affairs, Drury University (was unable to attend)