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## INTERNATIONALIZING GRADUATE STUDENT PROGRAMS: THE GLOBAL CONSORTIUM FOR INTERNATIONAL FAMILY STUDIES

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Today there is great hope that international efforts will prove to be fruitful and bring together a divided and conflicted world. Simultaneously, there also is genuine fear — based on a global history of seemingly interminable conflict among disparate peoples — that we will never be able to bridge the significant cultural divisions that remain. Research and education on a global scale will be critical if we are to be successful in our efforts to bring people together in a world that so often wants to pull us apart.

In this report we will very briefly outline more than 30 years of efforts to understand the strengths of families around the world — looking at *how families succeed* in a difficult environment rather than *why families fail*. More than 27,000 family members in 38 countries have participated in these studies.

We will also show how these efforts have culminated in a study that uncovered not only family strengths but also community strengths and cultural strengths from a global perspective. The most remarkable finding from this global study uniting researchers in 18 countries in all 7 of the world's most prominent geocultural areas is the finding that family strengths, community strengths, and cultural strengths are remarkably similar from culture to culture (DeFrain & Asay, 2007).

In essence, it can be argued that people are people, and families are families. Though every culture in the world is unique and different from every other culture, and though every family is unique and different from every other family, it is becoming more and more apparent that deep down the similarities outweigh the differences.

In the field of family studies there are a number of guiding principles that many professionals share. Prominent among these beliefs are three that are relevant to the discussion here:

1. The family, in all its magnificent diversity, is the most basic social unit in all human societies down through history. Every cultural has families, and though family structures can look very different from culture to culture, family functions are remarkably similar.

2. All the problems in the world either begin in families or end up in families. That is to say, families sometimes create their own problems and have to deal with the problems they create. And, families sometimes have the problems of the world — war,

environmental disaster, civil disorder and collapse — the problems of the world sometimes thrust themselves upon families. But either way, families in the final analysis end up being responsible for dealing with these problems on a day-to-day basis.

3. Finally, we believe that strong families help to create strong communities and nations; and that strong nations and communities help to build strong families.

### **Family Strengths, Community Strengths, and Cultural Strengths Worldwide**

*Family strengths.* The similarities that are found in research with families globally point to a set of qualities that describe the characteristics of strong families. When people from country to country and culture to culture talk about what makes their family strong, these are some of the traits they commonly identify:

#### **Appreciation and Affection**

Caring for each other  
Friendship  
Respect for individuality  
Playfulness  
Humor

#### **Positive Communication**

Giving compliments  
Sharing feelings  
Avoiding blame  
Being able to compromise  
Agreeing to disagree

#### **Spiritual Well-Being and Shared Values**

Hope  
Faith  
Compassion  
Shared ethical values  
Oneness with humankind  
Oneness with the Earth

#### **Commitment**

Trust  
Honesty  
Dependability  
Faithfulness  
Sharing

#### **Enjoyable Time Together**

Quality time in great quantity  
Good things take time  
Enjoying each other's company  
Simple good times  
Sharing fun times

#### **The Ability to Manage Stress and Crisis Effectively**

Adaptability  
Seeing crises as both challenges and opportunities  
Growing through crises together  
Openness to change  
Resilience

*Community strengths.* These include:

- ◆ A supportive environment that genuinely values families, and a general willingness and natural generosity infused in the culture to help when families are in need.
- ◆ An effective educational delivery system.
- ◆ Family-service programs developed by government and non-governmental organizations for families.
- ◆ A safe, secure and healthful environment.
- ◆ Religious communities for families seeking this kind of support.

**Cultural strengths.** These include:

- ◆ A rich cultural history.
- ◆ Shared cultural meanings.
- ◆ A stable political process.
- ◆ A viable economy.
- ◆ An understanding of the global society.

### **Family Studies**

Family Studies is a recognised field of study in ‘applied issues related to relationships’ and the integration of ‘theory, research and practice’ (Olson & DeFrain, 2003, p. 69). Supporting families in their diversity of form and need is a priority in most nations and requires a skilled and highly educated human services workforce. As a discipline of study, family studies provides students with comprehensive multi-disciplinary knowledge and skills to undertake research, policy development and service delivery directed towards strengthening families.

### **Internationalisation of Higher Education**

The past decade has seen significant growth in the internationalisation of higher education. This growth is the result of several different, but not mutually exclusive, driving forces, including:

- ◆ a desire to promote mutual understanding;
- ◆ the migration of skilled workers in a globalised economy;
- ◆ the desire of higher education institutions to generate additional revenues;
- ◆ the need to build a more educated workforce in the home countries, generally as emerging economies (OECD, 2004).

Intercultural curriculum is a component of a broader trend towards internationalization of higher education, which has been defined as:

the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of postsecondary education. (Freeman, 2009).

Intercultural curriculum is a significant dimension of internationalization of higher education and involves much more than course content about other cultures and countries. The term is used here to refer to the notion of ‘inclusiveness’ whereby different cultural perspectives are recognized and included in curriculum, and dialogue is constructed between diverse cultural perspectives in a spirit of reciprocity and mutuality (Curo & McTaggart, 2003).

The most common strategies to enhance intercultural learning are growth in enrolment of international students, offering programs off-shore and providing domestic students with off-shore learning opportunities within their programs of study. Models that involve international collaboration to provide students with local access to international courses as part of a structured program of study are not well developed and documented.

### **The Global Consortium for International Family Studies**

Co-hosted by the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences Institute of Sociology and University of Nebraska-Lincoln, the Chinese International Family Strengths Conference

was held in China in May, 2002. The meeting gathered family scholars from all over the world. While talking with these colleagues, we became aware that the world needs more professionals specialized in serving and studying families. However, there is a lack of family studies programs and training opportunities for countries that do not have family studies and family services as a specialization and for individuals who do not have money and other resources to go abroad for study. The conversation began focusing on how we can advance international family studies by providing the training by a group of dedicated family scholars, first between the two co-hosts and then among six countries. Ten years later, the Global Consortium for International Family Studies is set to enroll its first cohort group of students in the International Family Studies Program by the partner institutions in September, 2013.

Using global family strengths, community strengths, and cultural strengths as a unifying perspective that give us common ground and the confidence that a global approach to education really has a good possibility of working, the group of six institutions in six countries around the world has been developing the program. The institutions are:

- ◆ Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece
- ◆ Seoul National University, Republic of Korea
- ◆ East China Normal University, Shanghai, Peoples' Republic of China
- ◆ Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai, India
- ◆ University of Nebraska-Lincoln, USA
- ◆ University of Newcastle, Australia

This graduate program will give students in each country the opportunity to learn about families, communities, and cultures from faculty and other students around the world. The students will have the option of both online and face-to-face contact with faculty and other graduate students through Internet, classroom, field work with children, youth and families, and research experiences.

This graduate program is not simply a collection of old already-existing courses that each institution brings to the table, but genuinely new courses and new ways of looking at families, communities, and cultures. International teams of faculty are carefully constructing each course, working closely together to give students a genuinely new and unique global perspective. For example, in each of our countries we teach courses about family violence, but no one teaches a genuinely global way of looking at family violence and it is our responsibility to create such an approach for this program.

The first meeting was held on UNL campus in Lincoln, Nebraska, U.S. A. in November 2008, followed by the second meeting in Lincoln in June 2009. Faculty and administrators from the six institutions attended the first two meetings and expressed strong interests in investing in the development an international family studies degree program. As a result, the Global Consortium for International Family Studies was born. The GC partners agreed on basic principles, adapted from the groundbreaking efforts of an American organization, the Great Plains IDEA (2012): Consortium partners will behave as equals.

- ◆ Participating institutions will share leadership of the consortium.
- ◆ The consortium partners will respect and accommodate institutional and national differences.

- ◆ Programs will maintain an international focus through cross-international collaboration in program and course design, graduate competencies, course content, and assessment tasks.
- ◆ Student experience of program administration will be simple and seamless.
- ◆ Courses undertaken by students in any of the Family Studies programs offered by participating institutions will be recognized by all participating institutions.
- ◆ Programs will be underpinned by a sound literature base and will be designed for professional relevancy.
- ◆ Programs offered by the consortium and the effectiveness of the consortium will be rigorously evaluated.
- ◆ Each institution will calculate the amount per course and course weighting so that the total program cost and program weighting is equivalent across all institutions.

The third meeting of the GCEFS was held at the Aristotle University, Thessaloniki in November, 2009. As a result of this meeting the GCEFS developed a detailed proposal for consideration by participating institutions and other stakeholders. The proposal outlines the program structure, graduate attributes/competencies, and course descriptions for the prescribed/core courses. A draft Memorandum of Understanding was also developed for consideration and feedback by the six institutions.

### **Grassroots Efforts**

From the very beginning faculty members have been the driving force in developing this unprecedented graduate degree program in international family studies. With strong administrative support on campus in six countries, faculty spent their initial time together developing a strong curriculum for the unique program. Soon they realized this entailed more than curriculum development simply because of the differences in the degree requirement, specifically the way the degree requirements were called and calculated from institution to institution or country to country. For example, the American university uses credit hours while Australian university uses units. After much discussion we learned that in the end, the workload expected out of students working toward the degree is actually very similar from country to country. We cannot use the terms such as spring and fall semester because the spring in the U.S. is the fall in Australia. Instead number is used for three semesters with specific starting and ending dates and month.

The program will provide specialist intercultural and international education in the field of family studies. The program will initially be offered at the Masters level, with a view to future development of a professional doctorate in international family studies. The Masters program will consist of seven semester-long core courses and directed electives. The core courses will be developed collaboratively by consortium members and each course will be offered by two institutions every year on a rotating basis. The GCIFS will produce an annual schedule of course availability and institution of offer. Students will take classes together with students of other institutions and from professors of other institutions in different countries. Students in this program will hear and experiences different perspectives on daily basis through the course contents as well as interactions and communications with fellow students and professors of other countries.

### **Solve the Unsolvable**

One of the biggest challenges in developing this program is to find a financial model that works for all partner institutions. Realistically no institution can afford losing money by offering such a program no how matter how good and important the program is. The program will not last if it cannot sustain itself. After many hours of discussions basic principles for a fair and culturally sensitive were established.

Administrators from the participating institutions are working together to determine a fee structure that respects the policies and economic circumstances each country. The option being considered is a common fee with scholarships and grants covering tuition fees for students in countries where tuition fees are normally not charged or are charged at a lower rate than that normally charged in the USA and Australia.

It is expected that the GCIFS will secure grant funding to support the costs associated with curriculum development and initial operational costs. A proportion of student fees will also be allocated to the Consortium's role in development, marketing and administration of the program.

This paper has outlined a unique model of intercultural and international education in the field of family studies. The model has been developed by an international consortium of educators that are world leaders in the field of family studies. The consortium members are working collaboratively to design a comprehensive and integrated program that will provide students enrolled in institutions around the world with access to the specialist education that is required for policy, research and practice in human services work with families. The program will promote a rich intercultural learning experience through the participation of students from many countries in the courses, and through the opportunity for students to access international courses from their local base. The program could not be delivered by each institution individually — it is dependent on the collective contribution of the institutions participating in the consortium.

### **Gain Global Citizenry**

When we first talked about developing an international family studies program ten years ago, we only thought of teaching and sharing American family studies. Through the process, we have come to realize this is only an American perspective, not an international perspective. Through the decade-long process it has turned out that American scholars have learned as much as they have shared, if not more. Throughout the process each of us has moved step by step closer to global citizenry. We have learned about each other's differences with respect, but not without the clash of ideas and perspectives. We have formed a close professional tie as well as personal friendships. The trust formed among the GC partners allows us to challenge each other without being offended. Looking back, we have come to conclusion that a few key factors have made this dream program true:

- ◆ Vision, creativity and commitment
- ◆ A devoted faculty
- ◆ Strong support from administrators

As the world shrinks, the need for international collaboration expands. Fortunately, advances in technology have made it possible to work together around the world in ways

we could not have even imagined 15 or 20 years ago. This is extremely important, for we are now in a solid position to share our successes and challenges with each other from culture to culture and country to country. Rather than reinventing similar wheels independently of each other, we now can meet online and face-to-face regularly and the advances we can make together are genuinely amazing.

We believe this model of international education will work well not only in the field of international family studies, but in many other fields as well; and, we are eager to share our experiences with other academics interested in developing international efforts.

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