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A Century of International Education: From Experimentation to Integration

By Eduardo Contreras Jr.

AS THE FIRST World War raged on in Europe, two educators in the United States mobilized to consider the impact education could have on the world. In the summer of 1917, the president of Columbia University, Nicholas Murray Butler, and a political science professor at the City College of New York, Stephen Duggan, organized a gathering at the Hotel Nassau on Long Island that they called “The Conference on the Foreign Relations of the United States: An Experiment in Education” (Duggan, 1917). Butler and Duggan invited American scholars, legal experts, journalists and a variety of international diplomats from countries like Brazil and France to meet and discuss the role that education could play in peacefully shaping the world after the Great War. At the time, meetings like this were not the norm, and the term “international education” was not often used or even widely recognized. Buoyed by the belief that education could increase goodwill between citizens of the world, Butler and Duggan pressed on with their experiment in the face of the grim reality of the Great War.

The incandescent hope of this early experiment and other developments in the history of international education are worth deeper reflection. Contemporary practitioners can learn a great deal from the history of international education. First, this history shows just how far the field has come in the last 100 years. The past also provides examples of the persistent relevance and impact of the collective efforts of educators over the past century. Today, conferences on international education are commonplace, and the proceedings of these gatherings are immediately transmitted to an eager audience around the world via social media. Next, a historical lens on the collective efforts of international educators over the past century provides a means to consider the shortcomings and still-untapped potential of international education. Despite the many noble efforts of educators around the world, global conflicts persist, and ignorance continues to fuel xenophobia and distrust. In this way, history shows that there

are still lofty aims of international education that have not been fully realized.

Three Stages of International Education

Although the antecedents to international education as it is known today extend to the 19th century, the most dynamic developments in this field have occurred in the 20th century. Since the 1910s, international education has evolved in three periods that can be categorized with the following terms, *experimentation*, *expansion*, and *integration*. The period of *experimentation* began at the outset of the First World War in 1914 and lasted to the end of World War II in 1945. The wide *expansion* of international education began in 1946 and ended in 1979. The period of *integration* began in 1980 and extends to the present. These three periods demonstrate the manner in which international education developed from a scattered assortment of ad hoc experimental endeavors on a few university campuses to the more coordinated collection of strategic international activities that exist today at many institutions.

Experimentation

During the period of *experimentation*, university leaders began to consider ways in which their institutions could engage in the world, yet isolationism was the norm (especially in the United States) so any international efforts were deemed experimental. Like Duggan and Butler, some educators believed that the educational exchange of students and scholars would lead to deeper cultural awareness of others in ways that would stimulate mutual understanding and international partnerships. Several organizations formed in this period with the goal of increased international collaboration including the Institute of International Education (IIE), which was founded in 1919 by Nicholas Murray Butler, Stephen Duggan, and former secretary of state Elihu Root. Beyond the IIE, the other internationalist organizations created in this period were the Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst (DAAD) in 1925 and the British Council in 1934 (de Wit, 2012). At the



During the period of experimentation, Elihu Root, Nicholas Murray Butler, and Stephen Duggan established IIE in 1919.

institutional level, colleges and universities also began experimenting with programs to support student mobility. For example, The University of Delaware introduced the Foreign Study Plan in 1923, and Smith College introduced the Junior Year in France in 1925 as structured ways to send American undergraduates abroad for academic credit (Hullihen, 1928).

Expansion

After World War II, American universities began to expand their international endeavors as the United States gained a position of power in the world. During this period of *expansion*, U.S. institutions developed many areas of international education including: curriculum and instruction; student mobility; knowledge production; outreach; and university partnerships (Contreras, 2015). Many American institutions were engaging in some form of these activities in the 1950s and were also partnering with the U.S. government in international development and research programs. A growing number of international students began coming to the United States, and study abroad programs also continued to increase. The Cold War prompted several academics to argue that universities had an important stake in world affairs and that the functions and purposes of higher education had to be mindful of an international dimension (Wilson, 1951). By the end of the 1970s, international efforts had expanded in U.S. higher education, but few institutions fully coordinated their activities.

Integration

The final decades of the twentieth century marked a transition to the present era of the *integration*. In this period, the knowledge economy and globalization influenced campus administrators to think strategically about incorporating international activities to the everyday university functions of research, teaching, and service. Scholars also began describing this phenomenon as comprehensive internationalization (Knight, 1993). Through the ongoing process of comprehensive internationalization, a growing core of professional international educators focused on ways to improve many practices including: developing international curricula; supporting international students in the United States; developing rich cross-border institutional collaborations; and expanding participation in education abroad for a wider group of American students. As Jane Knight (2008) explained, comprehensive internationalization has become one of the “major forces impacting and shaping higher education as it evolves to meet the challenges of the 21st century” (Knight, 2008, p. ix). Thus,

this recent period of integration involves an extraordinary amount of strategic coordination to align with institutional missions and meet the needs of external changes in the world.

Looking Ahead

In 2015, no one would consider a conference on international education an “experiment.” This alone demonstrates great progress in the past century. Still, the question of whether international education has reached its potential remains tantalizingly unanswered. The efforts of faculty, administrators, students, foundations, government officials and a variety of proponents have combined to establish international education as a unique and thriving aspect of post-secondary education that continues to be shaped by global phenomena. Today, international education has greater influence in an increasingly interconnected world. To preserve this influence, continued stewardship and thoughtful leadership remains essential to have an impact for the next century. ■

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