Article

A reflection on future directions: Global international and intercultural competencies in higher education

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Abstract

In the final article of the special issue, we offer a reflection on the ideas presented by the authors and recommendations for future research on implementation and assessment of Global, International, and Intercultural (GII) competencies in higher education. Themes identified from the articles include the intersection of GII competencies and inclusive excellence in higher education, the importance of integrating GII learning into the core curriculum, and the high impact of interdisciplinary approaches. Parallel recommendations for future scholarship include: further application of the inclusive excellence framework to GII competencies research, additional study on methods for integration of GII learning into core curriculum, and attention to successful strategies for application within interdisciplinary settings.

Keywords

Global, International, and Intercultural competences, inclusive excellence, interdisciplinary curriculum

Introduction

The role of higher education is rapidly evolving; in response to persistent globalization, desired student learning outcomes have shifted to increasingly emphasize competencies tied to success in a diverse and interconnected economy (Di Pietro, 2015; Huang, 2013). It is considered one of the primary goals of graduate programs across the globe that students are prepared for a globalized world (ACE, 2011; Di Pietro, 2015; Huang, 2013; Knight, 2004; Zevallos, 2012). Hence, in order to be competitive, higher education must promote and succeed in supporting students' successful learning of numerous relevant competencies (Zevallos, 2012). As discussed in this special issue,

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these may be broadly described as Global, International, and Intercultural (GII) competencies; to integrate this learning into educational programs, the institutions must implement GII learning opportunities, including pedagogical practices and assessments throughout the process of achieving academic goals. It also implies that students, faculty members, and support staff need to adopt different cultural perspectives and global practices to practice multiculturalism (Fantini, 2009; Sinicorpe et al., 2007).

In response to these demands, it is vital to understand how institutions are adapting to this increasing effort to produce graduates who are so-called "global citizens." What strategies are being employed to develop GII competencies in students, through what processes, and how is their effectiveness being assessed? The articles in this special issue reflect on these questions and bring forth several important themes that warrant attention in future research. In the reflection that follows, we aim to highlight many of the recommendations from this issue as well as contribute our own perspectives on future ways to strengthen our understanding and practice of GII development in higher education. Our interpretation of these articles and the recommendations presented are framed by our personal experiences, as an international graduate student scholar (author one) and a graduate student scholar-practitioner in the field of international education (author two). We are both also influenced by our experience, specifically as students within an interdisciplinary doctoral program.

Inclusive excellence and global learning

One intersection that repeatedly emerged as an underpinning of several articles in this special issue is that of the relationship between GII learning and inclusive excellence in higher education. The notion of "inclusive excellence" goes beyond the concept of inclusion. It is not merely referring to the importance of access. Rather, this concept emphasizes the importance of creating high-quality, challenging learning environments for all and recognizes diversity of institutional members as a strong contributor to the educational experience (Milem et al., 2005). Practice of inclusive excellence not only increases access for historically underrepresented students, but also is beneficial to all students by increasing diversity of learning environments. In this issue, David Killick and Lily Arasaratnam-Smith have underscored the importance of developing curriculums to ensure a more engaged learning for students from diverse backgrounds. Paula Garret and Tim Jansa call for a renewed commitment to the important role of second language proficiency in GII competencies; and one basis of this argument is the framework that linguistic expectations of students should be for all, not some. What is the pedagogical logic for expecting international students to perform in English and not expecting native English speakers to learn proficiency in another language? Furthermore, Susan Appe questions the ethical impact of academic capitalism upon our institutional internationalization efforts and the connected outcome that international opportunities are ad hoc developed for certain groups of students based upon specific faculty interests. Several authors in this special issue reiterate research findings that demonstrate the high-impact potential of transformative GII learning outcomes achieved through a study abroad experience, but note the reality that this opportunity is not accessible to all students for varying reasons. Practitioner-scholars in the field of education abroad are grappling with this pervasive problem. There is now a significant body of valuable research on this topic that discusses the barriers that prevent students from engaging in global learning, but more must be studied in regards to identifying systemic institutional strategies that are effective in breaking them down. Applying this framework of institutional strategies to produce high-quality learning opportunities for all, at a systemic level, also reinforces the need to discuss GII learning approaches, pedagogies, and assessments not in silos but for all students, across the disciplines.

We posit that this intersection of inclusive excellence and GII learning presents a useful lens to apply for future research in GII competency development. Literature and attention to both of these

subjects are proliferating; and applying a theoretical framework of inclusive excellence and social justice theories, which emphasizes equitable access for students to gain critical competencies, may further advance the agenda to integrate and improve measurement of GII learning outcomes. Furthermore, it is imperative that progress made in GII scholarship will ensure the development of improvements for pedagogy and practices that benefit all students in higher education. In turn, by increasing diversity of participants in GII learning, all participants will benefit more. Commonly accepted is the idea of more diverse learning environments fostering a higher quality of learning at large, and most especially for the learning outcomes associated with GII competencies.

Collectively, the articles in this special issue have highlighted an emerging opportunity for scholarship development in GII research as framed by theories based in inclusive excellence and social justice. This is in line with the notion that fostering GII learning development is an institution's responsibility rather than a goal if we consider higher education as a tool for preparing students to live purposeful lives as engaged citizens. Other scholarship opportunities include studies specific to the examination of how schools are employing GII teaching strategies and who is (and is not) benefiting from them. Another recommendation for future research is using the method of case studies to present valuable information from any institutions that have been particularly successful in engaging diverse students across modes of internationalization for GII learning. One approach toward inclusive excellence for all that is discussed in this issue is emphasis upon the classroom learning environment and the core curriculum in which all matriculated students will encounter. In the following section, we discuss this idea further and highlight curriculum development as a critical way to incorporate GII competencies as one of the core values in higher education degree programs.

Integration of GII learning in the curriculum

In the field of international education, as noted in several instances of this special issue, the discussion of institutional internationalization efforts is most often interpreted as a reference to specific isolated strategies, such as international student recruitment or study abroad. This framework lends itself to GII competency goal setting that is clearly bounded and more amenable to assessment, but is in itself contradictory to the underpinning philosophies of global learning. How do we measure the GII learning outcomes for students who have not participated in one of these specific opportunities? How can we ascertain which desired competencies are successfully developed through classroom pedagogy and which (if any) do necessitate student immersion in international study, or another form of experiential learning beyond the classroom, in order to be achieved?

Scholars, including Katherine Krebs and David Killick in this issue, make strong arguments for focusing on strategies for implementation and assessment of GII competencies development strategies within the institutional curriculum. Krebs notes that depending on the presence of an international student body in the classroom for making the curricular experience a global one is not sufficient since mobility patterns are, of course, not consistent across regions and institutions. Killick emphasizes that focusing on the GII learning in a systematic manner, through the design of the mainstream curriculum, is key for reaching all students. Killick also points out that curriculum design provides a model readily amenable to measuring GII skill, knowledge and behavior competencies, though notes that the assessment of attitudes remains a challenge in this context. Framed by intercultural development theories, a study conducted by Soria and Troisi (2014) even indicates findings that suggest participation in "internationalization at home" activities, including enrolling in globally oriented coursework, may produce greater benefits for students over participation in study abroad.

From the perspective of an international education administrator, it is evident, albeit broadly accepted, that infusing global perspectives into the curriculum is arguably the most important

element of internationalizing student learning. This is also possibly the most challenging goal for an institution to reach; and even more challenging to continually assess. Achieving this goal involves many complexities including how to compel all disciplines to incorporate global perspectives and global student learning outcomes into their coursework, and how to agree on exactly what the learning outcomes and assessment measures are. In turn, many institutions conclude their efforts by implementing global learning through a general education requirement (Leask and Charles, 2018). This reinforces the notion of global learning as a contained, separate concept to be achieved on its own through a specific class, language training, or study abroad experience rather than as an integral, intentionally articulated and measurable component of all curricular and co-curricular student experiences. Unless we advocate for the latter approach, GII competencies are likely to be developed successfully for only some students, and not for the benefit of all.

Emphasis upon integrating GII learning into the curriculum all students will encounter also supports the argument for GII competencies development strategies founded in inclusive excellence, but still poses challenges in terms of broad-scale feasibility and assessment at the institutional level across disciplines. Susan Appe, in her article for this issue, highlights that GII competency development is spurred by faculty interests. In addition, the research studies that exist to analyze students' GII competencies development are usually specific to scholars' course or discipline, or focus on outcomes of one specific global experience, such as long- or short-term study abroad.

Future research needs are several in order to fill these gaps. Specific pathways for future scholarship include (a) additional research that analyzes the most effective, discipline cross-cutting classroom pedagogies for GII learning outcomes development, (b) further comparative study observing differences in student learning across modes of global curriculum at the home institution or experiential international learning and (c) presentation of case studies that demonstrate models for particularly successful instances of integrating GII learning across the full curriculum. While we assert that GII learning is critical for curriculum across all disciplines, in the subsequent section of our reflection we argue that its effectiveness is further enhanced through an interdisciplinary setting.

Interdisciplinary approaches and GII competencies

The theories on intercultural competence highlight a connection between individual-level outcomes and institutional level outcomes in terms of skill development (Deardorff, 2006). Skill is considered not only as an outcome, but also as a part of the ongoing development process throughout the academic life of a student (Fantini and Tirmizi, 2006). Skill is also considered the process of developing attitudes toward other cultures (Kimel and Volet, 2012). In the age of globalization, following an interdisciplinary approach would work positively for developing GII competencies (Fraser and Schalley, 2009). For example, bringing two different disciplines together to train students from different cultures for their profession (Finger and Kathoefer, 2005). This has been noted as valuable by scholars in many disciplines. For example, Finger and Katheofer (2005) identified that there are differences in the syllabus of business studies taught in the USA and Germany. They suggest learning that spans such different approaches is valuable for students' future business management career. Thus, a collaboration between two distinct styles of similar disciplines would benefit the students to do well in both cultural contexts. Two papers for this special issue, from Killick and Arasaratnam-Smith respectively, already emphasized the importance of conducting future research on curriculum development to understand possible avenues of engaging students with diverse identities; diverse both in student background and/or in discipline of study.

Successful fostering of GII learning outcomes is, in turn, we believe connected with increasing the development of undergraduate and graduate programs that intentionally integrate interdisciplinary learning and teaching into their pedagogy. Doctoral programs especially offer an opportunity to deeply impact improvements in GII teaching and learning; the experience of these students, for many, will impact how they approach their research and pedagogy in the future which in turn engages the next generations of learners. In interdisciplinary programs students can create a separate culture within the program, which eventually helps everyone in the program to understand how discipline-based cultures and students' own culture can be enmeshed to build a strong sense of globalism. As a result, intercultural communication is inherent in an interdisciplinary program. Different disciplines have different ways of observing the world. Thus, an interdisciplinary program provides students with an opportunity to know how different people are studying the world based on the knowledge of the discipline they receive as part of their training. Moreover, we reiterate that graduate programs produce future faculty teaching at different higher education institutions. Hence, an interdisciplinary graduate program would train the future pool of faculty who, in turn, would use GII competencies learning outcomes in their teaching and research. Additionally, admitting international students and training the students for a global career creates a conducive environment for developing GII competencies through interdisciplinary dialogue.

Being exposed to and placing importance upon diverse cultural viewpoints meets the theoretical requirements of GII competencies (Ariza, 2010; Banks et al., 2005; Gay, 2018; Huba and Freed, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Ohta, 2000; Pérez, 2004; Terrell and Lindsey, 2009). These two things ensure that students respect each other's culture and remain open to learning from each other. In addition to the concept of giving voice to diverse cultures around the world, it is needed to recognize the aspect of the "outsider." Here, "outsider" definition is subjective as it varies from person to person and their disciplinary focus. For example, one student from economics would try to interpret a problem from their training in that discipline. That student would consider others as "outsider." GII competencies can be successfully established if faculty and administrators devise a system that will provide the students with enough time and space to initiate the dialogue with their perceived "outsider" groups. A dialogue with "outsiders" will help both the students and faculty to decipher the complex problems from multiple perspectives through intercultural communication.

Several authors in this special issue emphasize the importance of language, and the language-related challenges of intercultural communication. Given the strength of the connection between language and culture, trying to advance GIIs without promoting language learning is likely to fall short. Similar types of language challenges exist within the realm of an interdisciplinary dialogue, where scholars in different disciplines fail to recognize the opportunities for collaboration because they use different terminology, that is, different language.

An interdisciplinary approach should not only include mechanisms to initiate interdisciplinary dialogues. Programs with interdisciplinary focus should also focus on building useful pedagogy and course structure to develop a sense of GII competencies within the program. Courses with a more rigid structure would not be helpful for GII competencies as it will only focus on one discipline and culture. Katherine Krebs rightly identified in her article for this issue that students need to have enough opportunities in the classroom to share their own culture with others. Krebs's point specifically underscores the importance of the role of the instructor who would facilitate the classroom environment to initiate intercultural dialogue to provide the students from different disciplines with enough space to gain GII competencies. Hence, the instructor needs to be very proactive in accommodating different strategies in both classroom-based discussions and coursework. Thus, pedagogy is critical to initiate interdisciplinary dialogue for implementing GII competencies policies. Additionally, more frequent informal connections

between international students and domestic students are critical for GII competencies from an interdisciplinary approach perspective.

GII competency development research is based largely on studies limited to individual disciplines and examining the effectiveness of single internationalization approaches in isolation. Interdisciplinary approach is important to augment research on issues like intercultural communication and curriculum development. Despite facing different challenges due to globalization, many interdisciplinary programs do not have any normative understanding of GII competencies. Hence, it is important to create an environment for establishing a normative structure in every interdisciplinary program. Such normative structure requires further research identifying the crucial role of intercultural communication, second language learning, and courses accommodating multiculturalism in pedagogical style to have interdisciplinary dialogues for GII competencies.

Conclusion

It is evident that the relevance of GII competencies for purposes of professional success and engaged citizenship will continue to grow as globalization persists. In the political environment of today, arguably, it is more important than ever and is even a responsibility of higher education institutions to provide students with successful GII learning in order for them to contribute to the advancement of a democratic society. In this brief reflection, we have considered and reiterated only some of the important themes from this special issue, and contributed our own perspectives on next steps for advancing GII research and pedagogy in higher education. Our key recommendations for future scholarship include: further application of the inclusive excellence framework to GII competencies research, additional study, including varied comparative methodology on integration of GII learning into core curriculum, and emphasis upon the importance of interdisciplinary application, in regards to training, learning, and research forward.

Funding

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