

Changing International Constructs: How Metropolitan Universities Must Engage Globally

Mitch Leventhal and Nancy L. Zimpher

Abstract

The mission of American metropolitan universities has never before been so relevant, both to the future of institutions themselves and to the United States. The success of the mission requires that we develop a deep understanding of the impact of both urbanization and de-urbanization, as well as the challenges metropolitan universities face with accelerating globalization. It is the view of the authors that the present focus of metropolitan universities is inadequate for the challenges of the twenty-first century. A new approach is needed: one that regards the university as an enterprise and which seeks to more cogently capitalize on existing strengths, identifies new opportunities worldwide, supports innovation, and ensures financial sustainability over the long haul. In short, metropolitan universities must adopt an approach that is global, enterprise-wide, entrepreneurial, and focused on research excellence, curricular innovation, and economic fundamentals.

Urbanization and De-Urbanization: Twin Challenges for the Twenty-first Century

As we face an increasingly globalized economy, the mission of American metropolitan universities has never before been so relevant, both to the future of institutions themselves and to the United States. The success of the mission requires that we develop a deep understanding of the impact of both urbanization and de-urbanization, as well as the challenges metropolitan universities face with accelerating globalization and developmental complexity.

The story of the twenty-first century will be about urbanization on a scale never before encountered; at the same time, other major urban areas will continue depopulating at an alarming rate. In 2000, about 47 percent of the world's population lived in urban areas, with 411 cities having populations over one million. By 2015, five cities are projected to top 20 million (Tokyo, Mumbai, Lagos, Dhaka and Sao Paolo); with the 10 most populous cities having a combined population of approximately 208 million. It is expected that 60 percent of the world's population will be urban by 2030; most of this urban growth will occur in developing countries. By mid-century, we're likely to see cities topping 50 million. Mega-urbanization will create social and environmental problems on a magnitude unheard of before in human history.

Concurrently, in many developed countries, declining birth rates combined with economic and lifestyle change, are resulting in urban depopulation at an alarming rate. As the tax base declines, infrastructure crumbles resulting in a downward spiral of social and environmental decay. In both cases, that of urbanization and de-urbanization (or de-industrialization), rising crime is a persistent problem.

Just as the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were the era of the Land Grant University—which greatly aided the Green Revolution worldwide—the twenty-first century will be the era of the metropolitan research university, as our best minds tackle the complex and pressing problems of urbanization, both here and abroad.

But are America’s metropolitan universities ready to tackle the challenges associated with global urbanization? Are they really prepared to play on a globalized educational field? What must metropolitan universities do to become vital global players in the years ahead?

Globalized and Globalizing Universities

Few metropolitan universities acknowledge the centrality of urbanization and de-urbanization to their global mission. Still, universities worldwide are struggling to come to grips with internationalization and globalization and what it means to their global strategies. Unfortunately, most continue to view the challenge through the lens of an earlier era, conceiving solutions almost entirely focused on student exchange, international recruitment and curricular internationalization.

It is our view that this strictly academic and curricular focus is inadequate for the challenges facing metropolitan universities in the twenty-first century. A new approach is needed: one that regards the university as a creative enterprise and which seeks to more cogently capitalize on existing strengths, identifies new opportunities, supports innovation, and ensures financial sustainability over the long haul. In short, cutting-edge universities need an approach that is enterprise-wide, entrepreneurial, and focused on creativity, research excellence, curricular innovation, and economic fundamentals—with all of these activities connecting back to the central metropolitan mission.

This essay reflects our view, utilizing the University of Cincinnati as our case study. However, the issues facing UC are not extraordinary; in fact, they are commonplace among most metropolitan universities.

Our “Inherited” International Situation

The University of Cincinnati is a comprehensive research university with approximately 35,000 students across 16 colleges/schools. Historically, the university had no chief international officer, no single office where strategy was formulated or to whom individual colleges, departments or faculty members reported international activities or outcomes. Like many (perhaps most) universities, two offices were responsible for certain (but not all) aspects of our international activities. Our international programs

office oversaw study abroad and exchange-related activities, and our international students and services office assisted with immigration and visa matters, as well as assisting with orientation and assimilation of incoming foreign students.

Neither of these offices had a substantial role in developing or implementing institution-wide international strategy nor was either mandated to do so. Furthermore, while ably staffed, neither office had been charged with undertaking anything approaching a comprehensive strategic planning process on behalf of the institution.

The university's approach began to change with the appointment of a Vice Provost for International Affairs in September 2005. In interviewing various deans, department heads and administrators since this hiring, the new vice provost quickly learned that nobody has had any clear or comprehensive understanding of the scope of the university's international engagement. There has been no single source where one could find a complete list of institutional collaboration agreements or Memoranda of Understandings (MOUs) nor was there any system for assessing the productivity of agreements. There was no "accountability infrastructure." It was impossible to know what, exactly, was occurring with particular partner institutions. Of course, this was just the tip of the iceberg. Nearly all activities undertaken were ad hoc; while some might have been regarded as strategic, none were initiated or undertaken as part of anything which could be referred to as a strategic plan. To a very real degree, one might say that "MOU fatigue" had set in; so many had been signed over the preceding decades, but few outcomes could be identified. UC is not alone in this practice as many who read this article will surely know.

Thinking about the International Enterprise: Managing Opportunity and Risk

An increasing number of institutions in the United States, including the University of Cincinnati, are now realizing that international activity, and particularly international strategy, cannot be undertaken in a disjointed and fragmented way. Instead it requires 1) leadership and vision, 2) mapping relationships and finding opportunities, 3) changing constructs and the static curriculum, and 4) risk and opportunity management.

Leadership and vision. Universities which are serious about the international enterprise now require the appointment of a chief international officer, vested with the authority to develop institution-wide strategic plans encompassing all colleges and departments. In the case of our university, this initiative has been warmly embraced by deans and faculty as it has rapidly become clear that a coherent strategy will mean greater opportunity for all colleges and faculty members as well as for students.

Mapping relationships and finding opportunities. It is difficult to plan for the future without a complete knowledge of the institution's historic and existing relationships. A persistent problem at universities of all types is the difficulty in mapping international activity across its various dimensions. Traditionally, many activities are not reported

centrally. Although institutions have formal agreements, departments and colleges have their own pet projects and faculty members have yet another set of professional relationships and networks. It is extremely rare for a research-intensive institution to have anything approximating a complete picture of its engagement in a particular country or with a particular foreign institution. Therefore, it is uncommon for institutions to have effective means to connect the dots, identify strengths, and create new opportunities. What is needed is not so much “central control” as much as “central oversight.”

At the University of Cincinnati, we have begun constructing an institution-wide database that tracks our significant international activities. The Cincinnati Online System for Managing International Collaboration (COSMIC)[9] comprehensively maps all international activities at our institution such as:

- Institutional Collaboration and Activity Agreements
- Faculty Research & Creative Activity
- Feeder Institutions for International Students
- Faculty Nationality and Foreign Institutions Attended
- Foreign Destinations of UC Students Abroad
- Foreign Operations of Corporate Partners (sponsored research/cooperative education partners)
- International Alumni

When fully deployed, COSMIC will allow UC’s new international planning unit to see the totality of activity by country, by foreign institution, or by discipline. It will allow UC to annually review all activity agreements to ascertain whether we (and our partners) are achieving the objectives set out and meeting our respective commitments and to make corrections, if needed. It will allow faculty to identify where relationships exist and how to maximize their own international engagement through collaboration. The database will, in short, provide the enterprise-wide glue that will permit the colleges and faculty to collaborate more effectively and to create more productive and effective programs.

Changing constructs and the static curriculum. Unfortunately, most universities are still defining internationalization in terms of 1960s constructs: primarily study abroad, exchange-based relationships, and international recruitment. More recent discourse includes internationalizing the curriculum, inculcating “cultural competence,” and preparing students for the global workforce. While all of these elements are important, even vital, they are just a fraction of the international picture that twenty-first century universities must increasingly address to achieve their mission and remain competitive. It is time for universities to question their old, comfortable constructs as well as the curriculum considered essential for competent international education managers.

The fact is, there is no unifying and common curriculum with which we educate our “international education managers.” In fact, there is hardly a curriculum at all. Most people serving in positions of responsibility in international education have learned

“on the job” with supplemental instruction from the traditional international education bodies (NAFSA, AIEA, EAIE, etc). These entities largely remain focused on the same limited constructs referred to above.

With growing institutional complexity and increased globalization, senior managers need to be generalists in the broadest sense. They need to have a deep understanding of enrollment management, foreign credential evaluation and quality assurance, immigration regulations, private sector collaboration, partnership modalities, risk management, manpower and workforce planning, contract management, relationship management, trade agreements, cross-cultural counseling, comparative national development priorities, comparative education, language, and much more. Few international offices have these skills embodied across their entire personnel spectrum, much less embodied in a senior manager. In short, critical skills are missing and little has been done from a curricular and staff development perspective to address this deficiency.

Risk and opportunity management. Two sides of the same coin, these are often given “lip service” but are rarely discussed in a sophisticated or truly meaningful way. The prevailing view is that risk management relates to liability in the event of injury to a student. While this is a real concern, it is only one element of risk. Most universities have no strategies to address other risks. What kinds of risks are we speaking of? Let’s look at just a few.

Universities with substantial international activities may face significant risk in the event of sudden fluctuations in the value of a national currency. Who manages currency risk? Do the international education managers have this responsibility? In most cases, the answer is “no.” Are university financial officers focused on this risk? Often they are not until it is too late. Universities in Australia took a significant hit in 2004 when the Australian dollar substantially strengthened, resulting in reduced Asian demand for Australian education. Conventional currency-hedging strategies could have taken the edge off of the exigencies some institutions subsequently faced.

Universities that support significant global recruiting activities face significant risk if they are too heavily invested in the recruitment of one nationality. In the event that currency devaluation occurs or an epidemic like SARS rears its head or a revolution takes place, an entire year’s marketing investment—an entire class of students—may be lost. To the extent that universities both balance their recruitment and balance the modes of delivery available (i.e. incoming students, faculty instruction abroad, distance education), risk can be substantially mitigated and a significant crisis reduced to a modest disturbance, or less. Yet few institutions consider delivery modality as an element of their risk management approach.

Changing immigration regulations (at home and abroad), changing priorities of corporate or institutional clients, changing manpower and workforce needs, and international trade agreements (WTO, GATS, APEC, NAFTA, etc.) all represent significant risks and opportunities. These must be anticipated by international education managers so that strategies are in place in advance of potential future crises.

Ask yourself these questions:

Does my institution have a clearly articulated international strategy? Does my institution have country-specific strategies (at least for the largest and most critical countries)? Do we need a currency-hedging strategy? Are we following trends in cross-border quality assurance and mutual recognition among accrediting bodies in order to identify programmatic opportunities? Is our global recruiting balanced or are we “at risk” due to over-concentration? Are our modes of educational service delivery balanced, or can they be balanced, to mitigate risk and broaden opportunity? Are we aware of how emerging global and regional trade regimes may affect our university’s global opportunities? If you answered “no” to any of these, then your institution is at risk and is certainly not maximizing its opportunities.

Creating Your Value Proposition and Engaging the World

Metropolitan universities serve the communities and citizens where they are located. Their primary mission is to prepare students to maximize their opportunities in the world and to improve the living conditions, prosperity and environment in the communities in which they are embedded.

As the world becomes more interconnected, metropolitan universities must be at the forefront of creating opportunities for their students, opportunities that can also benefit the local community. This can only be accomplished by engagement with the world. At the same time, the world thirsts for the expertise that American metropolitan universities have; expertise that has never been so relevant to the issues facing cities worldwide, particularly cities in the areas of the world experiencing the fastest economic growth.

By professionalizing their approach to managing themselves as an international enterprise, metropolitan universities can better maximize opportunities for their students, faculty and community, and create institutions that are more relevant, stronger and more vital for the future. By creating an enterprise infrastructure for success, universities put in place the means by which faculty become empowered to think differently about their relevance to the world and their ability to initiate change. Institutions that fail to do so will become increasingly marginalized and irrelevant.

The University of Cincinnati cannot say that it has mastered all of the aspects of international education management needed in order to fully engage the world as a leading urban research institution, but we have started the process and intend to meet with success and to position ourselves as a leading global metropolitan university for the twenty-first century.

Author Information

Mitch Leventhal is University of Cincinnati’s vice provost for international affairs.

Nancy L. Zimpher is the 25th president of the University of Cincinnati.

Mitch Leventhal
University of Cincinnati
5126 One Edwards
Cincinnati, OH 45221-0640
E-mail: mitch.leventhal@uc.edu
Telephone: 513-556-0131
Fax: 513-226-3990

Nancy Zimpher
Office of the President
University of Cincinnati
P.O. Box 210063
Cincinnati, OH 45221-0063
E-mail: president@uc.edu
Telephone: 513-556-2201
Fax: 513-556-3010