

# Taking Leadership in Initiating a Comprehensive US International Education Policy

Kaetlyn Lad

*St. Mary's College of California*

A first step to ensuring that emerging school leaders possess the dispositions and skills necessary to be successful in a global community is for educational leaders to take initiative in moving toward a comprehensive US International Education Policy. This article introduces possible steps to initiate such a policy.

## Introduction

In this ever-increasing global age, Americans need enhanced international skills and knowledge of international developments and trends to guarantee educational competence and competitiveness. A national policy on international education is vital to ensuring that our citizens and future generations of Americans are prepared to maintain U.S. global leadership and participation. Yet it is clear that we lack a serious commitment as a nation to international education—policies and programs that convey effective global literacy to students and other citizens as an integral part of their education (NAFSA, 2006).

International and cross-cultural awareness and understanding on the part of Americans will be crucial to effective United States leadership, competitiveness, prosperity, and national security in this century (Alliance for International Education and Cultural Exchange, 2007). However, in spite of our current laws, the United States lacks a coherent, coordinated, operational policy for educating its citizens internationally.

A policy is needed that promotes international education in the broadest sense, including supporting the learning of foreign languages and in-depth knowledge of other cultures by Americans, promoting study abroad by United States students, encouraging foreign students to study in the United States, (Lincoln Commission, 2005) facilitating the exchange of scholars and of citizens at all levels of society, and support for the educational infrastructure through which we produce international competence and research (NAFSA 2007).

However, the question remains, once an effective policy framework is developed and articulated it then becomes necessary that the educational community proactively make the policy into a reality (American Planning Association, 2006). For that goal to come to fruition, it is necessary to per-

suaude both our political and educational policymakers as well as stakeholders in the business community, that such a framework is both vital and necessary to insuring America's global interests, security and prosperity. This paper will examine the several elements essential to a sound and comprehensive international education policy while and briefly introduce the stages in a grassroots effort aimed at implementation of such a policy.

### **Possible Framework**

There was a time and age when the art and practice of diplomacy fell solely within the domain of governments. But in the 21st Century and with 21st Century technology, this is obviously no longer true. Individuals and institutions alike, in both the public and private sectors, find themselves more and more engaged in a long list of issues and concerns (academic, economic and political) that span the globe. The achievements of educational, economic, political and scientific goals require increased cooperation and collaboration that transcend national boundaries and involve broad networks of partners (Alliance, 2007). As direct contact between citizens and organizations becomes more and more widespread, if not commonplace, a mature knowledge of other cultures and perspectives becomes an overriding theme (Institute of International Education, 2007). Our ability to assimilate and understand not only foreign languages but even more importantly, foreign customs, social norms and expectations is indispensable if we as a nation, expect to achieve continued economic prosperity, increased security and an understanding of our global neighbors.

International education must acknowledge this new paradigm of objectives and stakeholders and find ways to develop the expertise and experience of all our citizens. Raising the bar in terms of emphasis on international education will only work to strengthen our nation for the future. Increasing engagement with other nations requires a greater awareness of cultural diversity (US Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, 2008) and recognition of shared values, challenges and differences between nations and peoples (Lincoln Commission, 2005). Expanding these horizons will promote a deeper understanding of the cultural heritage and diversity that exists within our own borders (US Department of State, Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, 2001). While opinions among education experts certainly may differ, an international education plan might include, at a minimum, the following core elements and policy goals (NAFSA, 2007):

1. The free and open opportunity for US citizens to study and conduct research abroad.
2. An active recruitment program that creates a free and open opportunity for scholars and students from other countries to study and conduct research in the United States.
3. An expansion of curriculum in U.S. schools and universities on foreign cul-

- tures, customs, religious practices, etc. and that includes the training of U.S. experts in the economies, cultures, languages, politics, and histories of other nations.
4. An increased commitment to promote the learning of foreign languages by U.S. citizens and conversely, the learning of English by residents of other countries.
  5. Studies and research that examines U.S. educational progress comparative to other nations, with a special focus on foreign educational policies and practices that would improve US education.
  6. Information sharing on best practices that strives to achieve universal basic education.

Within these broad policy goals and ideals, there exist specific recommendations for arriving at an international education system that is more comprehensive and more responsive to its participants and supporters. It is incumbent upon the leaders and constituents in the field of international education that our governments, corporations and academic institutions realize the valuable benefits that are derived from increasing the allocation and resource levels for our international educational programs (US Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, 2008). In exploring each of the policy goals indicated above, we are able to enumerate some of the deficiencies in our present system as well as present a myriad of ways to overcome the barriers and therefore begin to approach the possible goals we have outlined.

### **Increasing American Presence Abroad**

In addressing the issue of increasing the number of Americans studying abroad, there exists a long list of measures that might be endorsed (Lincoln Commission, 2005). An example of one important measure would be to increase investment in the existing international curricula development and student mobility consortia programs administered by the Department of Education's Fund for the Improvement of Post Secondary Education (FIPSE). This investment could take the shape of increasing the number, duration, and diversity of student exchanges, as well as the quality of pre-departure and post-return components. Another worthwhile activity is to ensure that the provisions of the International Opportunity Act of 2000 are widely advertised. This legislation has created opportunities for students of limited financial means to study abroad. Student populations and their families that have little exposure to such possibilities should be targeted. While still another recommendation would be to establish a program of federal matching grants to leverage private, corporate, and university support for study abroad.

Other important steps might include: building on existing efforts that encourage study abroad participation by students at community colleges and other institutions which have traditionally been under-represented in such programs; creating additional opportunities for graduate study abroad

under the Department of State's Fulbright programs (Institute of International Education, 2007); increasing support for the Institute for International Public Policy Program that provides training of minority students in international affairs; and encouraging federal programs to establish invitational priorities for the development of additional study abroad opportunities and model study abroad programs.

### **Easing Access to American Soil**

During the past decade, the U.S. share of the total number of foreign students declined from around 40% to 30%. For foreign students aspiring to study in the United States, the costs of enrolling in a U.S. institution, as well as visa, tax, and other policies, constitute barriers for many students who might otherwise come to American soil. Another obstacle impeding the access of foreign students to the U.S. is that government funding for overseas educational advising has declined over 50% in constant dollars since 1993, diminishing our ability to promote U.S. educational opportunities in foreign markets.

There are multiple approaches to address this issue. One tactic would be to standardize and strengthen overseas educational information centers thereby increasing their capability to provide comprehensive quality services to international students and scholars seeking educational opportunities in the U.S. Another approach is to award additional fellowships under the Humphrey Program, which provides study and professional opportunities in the U.S. to mid-career professionals, and provides assistance to reinforce Fellows' effectiveness once they return home.

Another and more obvious route is to expand USAID's support for training linked to high-priority strategic objectives and programs in developing nations. Other solutions worthy of consideration include: (1) establishing an International Education Council with the intent of coordinating efforts that will strengthen the U.S. government's commitment to international education; (2) developing an easily accessible web site for international students on studying in the U.S., a commitment that would include information on financial aid, visas and testing; (3) building a coalition of government and private-sector organizations to support the broad range of international educational information services abroad and (4) working with community colleges to feature these schools as unique resources for foreign students (Council for International Exchange of Scholars, 2007).

In addressing some of the specific administrative obstacles for foreign students and professionals to study pursue exchange opportunities in the U.S., such as visa restrictions and immigration procedures, a variety of proposals are worthy of consideration. One solution calls for enhanced training for State Department Consular Officers on the U.S. education system and educational and cultural exchange to help them better evaluate foreign student and exchange visa applications. Another approach is to provide information and guidance regarding exchanges, employment options, and

long-term opportunities to U.S. school districts that desire to enhance their teaching staff with international expertise. Other possible means of overcoming these obstacles include: (a) revising regulations to maximize the availability of federal student financial aid for study abroad, (b) exploring ways to adequately staff consular services overseas in order to expedite visa information and processing services and (c) lessening the burden of U.S. tax reporting requirements for foreign students, scholars and exchange program participants.

### **Learning to Speak Other Languages**

Unlike many education systems in Europe and some other parts of the world, the vast majority of U.S. school districts begin second-language instruction at the secondary level, when research shows such learning begins to be more difficult. To help provide better teaching about other countries, languages, and cultures in K–12 and post secondary education, it is important that U.S. schools, as well as colleges and teacher training programs, effectively prepare their students to learn the languages and cultures of the world. This preparation should begin in the early grades, and continue throughout the life of a student's education.

In addition to helping Americans learn foreign languages and cultures, the U.S. has an interest in improving the quality of English instruction in countries around the world. These improvements require additional personnel who are well trained in the teaching of English to foreign nationals, and the incorporation of modern technology. This is a crucial part of our global engagement, as the growing use of English as the language of business, research, and international affairs worldwide aids the free exchange of information and ideas. In order to meet this goal, increased funds will be needed to support investment in state/district K–12 foreign language programs, including immersion, innovative and model programs. One specific funding target should be an investment in post secondary national centers for language, business, and area and international studies for outreach to help schools, two- and four-year colleges, and communities acquire competence in foreign language and international activities, with particular attention to underrepresented populations, communities and institutions.

Another option is to create a more accessible flow of American professionals and students to other nations and conversely bring foreign students here could be realized by the expansion of Fulbright teacher exchange and other Fulbright-Hays programs in target partner countries, focusing on underrepresented world regions and special projects to compare best practices in critical fields (Council for International Exchange of Scholars, 2007). Still more examples include: (1) providing exchange students with language learning stipends to learn the language of their host country, (2) increased support for foreign language-specific associations to continue and expand their immersion teacher institutes abroad, (3) establishing a

summer institute in the U.S. for foreign English teachers, and (4) devising a plan that makes international experience a significant part of teacher professional development for both new and experienced teachers.

### **Promoting the Exchange of Ideas**

International comparative studies of student achievement and educational context are the cornerstone of our ability to understand how well the U.S. education system prepares young people for the world of the future. Throughout the world, educators and policymakers strive to improve their own nation's education system. Yet reforms are often undertaken without knowledge of the practices, advances, and difficulties of other countries. At the same time that the U.S. is learning from educational policies and practices in other countries, many other Nations are eager to learn more about the American educational experience. When formulating new education policies, other nations can learn from the U.S. in various ways, for instance: fostering creativity and innovation; providing educational opportunities for students with special needs; community colleges; and family and community participation in education (United States Department of State, Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, November 2000). By learning from each other, educators around the world can improve their ability to offer high quality education for all.

Here again, a host of ideas that will foster a broad exchange of creativity and innovation are available for implementation. One obvious solution is to make an effort to eregather and disseminate "best practices," for example, identifying school districts that have successfully implemented foreign language programs for all students. In addition, there is a need to locate findings from research regarding the benefits of learning a second language. An ambitious but not insurmountable proposal is the attempt to maintain an international information database on the status of education around the world that encompasses women and children, minorities, and the disabled. Other means of learning from each other are to assist overseas groups to establish and strengthen National Associations of English Teachers in their countries as well as establishing a broad inventory of cross-national comparative and analytic activities, studies, and outreach efforts being conducted by federal agencies and non-governmental organizations.

Of course, the opportunity for the interchange of ideas will be restricted without the infusion of additional resources. Target areas for increased investment should aim to bolster the study of promising education practices and policies in other countries and communicate this information to American educators. These promising practices need to include joint research with other countries concerning areas of mutual policy concern such as improving the performance of low-performing schools and the need to develop a regular cycle of international studies of student performance.

## **Moving a Policy Forward**

Now that a broad but far from all-inclusive range of possible solutions has been presented, the question becomes what options and strategies would move to establish a more robust and coherent international education policy, how can the supporters and the stakeholders of international education realistically achieve such a policy (Grassroots Advocacy Training Exchange [GATE], 2002). The answer may lie in a strategy that relies on the ability to persuade policy makers and legislators of the critical need and the benefits of fueling and maintaining a wide-ranging and meaningful international education policy. At this juncture then, this paper will briefly address and delineate a grassroots advocacy strategy as a first step in realizing the necessary policy changes previously discussed.

### **A System for Grassroots Advocacy**

The Grassroots Advocacy Training Exchange (GATE, 2002) recommended five stages for initiation and implementation of a grassroots effort. The first stage of any grassroots advocacy campaign is to identify the decision makers, those individuals, groups and organizations with the power to validate and institutionalize the reforms and changes that the advocacy group wants to implement. Once the decision makers are identified, it becomes critical to determine what the advocacy campaign needs to know about them. It is necessary to gain an awareness of the elected official's political party, committee assignments, political points of view and, if possible, their voting record on your issues (Project Inform, 2002).

The second stage of an advocacy campaign has to do with a clear definition and understanding of the issues, and in this case that is of course movement towards a comprehensive international education policy. It will be necessary for the campaign advocates to develop and expand their knowledge base of the issue (its history, background, current status, etc). The next step is to merge stage one with phase two. The campaign advocates and supporters need to identify who can give them what they want, that is, the target(s) for grassroots advocacy and then identify what the decision makers need to know.

A third and vitally important stage of the advocacy campaign process is to identify the leadership for the grassroots advocacy campaign and determine other individuals and groups with whom you would like to initiate cooperative efforts. The forming of a coalition is a key element in an advocacy campaign.

The fourth stage of the advocacy campaign will require a determination of who will do what, how will it be done, when and where; these are the "nuts and bolts" grassroots advocacy actions. Some of your activities will be group efforts (e.g., issue briefings, meetings with legislators, press conferences). Other actions will be individual efforts (e.g., letter writing, action alerts). But all will require a plan and coordination. The central

message that you wish to convey is the highly critical element to this part of the campaign that supersedes all other activities of the advocacy campaign. Developing the most influential and persuasive message (or argument) for why your policy changes initiatives are necessary is important as it sets the tone what the goals of your campaign will be. The message needs to resonate not just with policy makers but also with the public and it needs to remain consistent throughout the life of the campaign.

The fifth and final stage of establishing a grassroots advocacy campaign is to determine the means by which to increase public awareness of your goals thereby garnering broad based support for the policies you wish to see enacted. The last piece of guidance that can be provided is to stress the importance and effectiveness of working within a coalition. Building and maintaining effective coalitions is central to achieving the political results you want. Recognize that there are already a number of players on any given issue. Begin by identifying potential allies and opponents. Open lines of communication and, when appropriate, involve other groups in your activities. By establishing partnerships you can both raise your credibility and use another group's network to communicate your message.

## Conclusion

It is necessary to establish an international educational policy as the basis for creating leadership preparation program that ensure emerging school leaders possess the dispositions and skills necessary to be successful in a global community. The United States needs an international education policy to retain its competitive place in the workforce by ensuring strong international and cross-cultural skills. It is still important to promote better understanding to the United States by the citizens for the world. Significant progress has been made since NAFSA and the International Alliance for International and Educational Cultural Exchange, in 1999, called for an international education policy (NAFSA, 2007). U.S. competitiveness and security require specific action be taken to make that policy a reality.

## References

- Alliance for International Educational and Cultural Exchange. (2007, October) *The benefits of international exchange*. Retrieved January 23, 2008, from <http://www.alliance-exchange.org>. 1776 Massachusetts Avenue, NW, Suite 620, Washington, DC 20005.
- American Planning Association. Retrieved February 2008, from <http://www.planning.org/advocacy>. 122 S. Michigan Avenue, Suite 1600, Chicago, IL 60603.
- Council for International Exchange of Scholars. (2007). Retrieved February 2008, from <http://www.iese.org/cies/>. 3007 Tilden Street NW, Suite 5L, Washington DC 20008.
- Grassroots Advocacy Training Exchange. (2002). Retrieved January 2008, from

<http://www.grassroots-advocacy.com/gate.html>. 3007 Tilden Street NW, Suite 5L, Washington DC 20008.

NAFSA: United State International Education Policy (2007). Retrieved February, 2008 from [Http://www.nafsa.org/public\\_policy.sec/united\\_states\\_iinternationa.l](Http://www.nafsa.org/public_policy.sec/united_states_iinternationa.l). An international education policy for U.S. leadership, Competitiveness, and Security. 1307 New York Avenue, NW, 8th Floor, Washington, DC, 20005.

NAFSA: Association of International Educators (2007). Retrieved January 2008, from <http://www.nafsa.org/Template.cfm?Section=PublicPolicy&NavMenuID=50>. 1307 New York Ave., NW, 8th Floor, Washington, DC 20005.

Project Inform. (2002). Retrieved February 2008, from <http://www.projinf.org/pdf/tan101.pdf>. 205 13th Street, Suite 2001, San Francisco, CA 94103.

Institute of International Education. Retrieved January 2008, from <http://www.iie.org>. 809 United Nations Plaza, New York, NY 10017-3580.

United States Department of State, Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (February, 2001). *Report of the International Education Study Team—Survey of U.S. Posts International Education: Obstacles and Opportunities*.

United States Department of State, Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, (November 2000). *Others' Open Doors, How Other Nations Attract International Students: Implications for U.S. Educational Exchange*.