

On the Ground Overseas:
How the International Engagement of U.S. Institutions of Higher Learning
Prepares Students for a Global Future

Executive Summary

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This paper examines a broad spectrum of on-the-ground overseas engagements by U.S. colleges, universities, and organizations in pursuit of three questions. What role can such endeavors play in international education and language learning for U.S. students? What factors can enhance this role? What practices and policies insure that such factors are put in place?

The international partnerships, centers, branches, and offices considered in this analysis are not new phenomena, but have increased in number and taken on expanded significance in the 21st century. By assembling research on such operations, exemplary cases of institutional practice, and the literature on several closely related topics, the paper concludes that such operations are expanding because they are vital to creating the international connections increasingly important, perhaps even essential, for international learning in the 21st century.

The broadened scale and purpose of these overseas operations reflects the fact that the audience and goals of international education have also expanded. Cutting-edge research, scholarship, and professional practice are now globally interactive, across all disciplines. All students, no matter their majors, will live their lives and conduct their careers in the context of globalized communities and networks. They must develop their abilities for international interaction, application, and engagement alongside the more long-standing international learning goals of developing area expertise, understanding global dynamics, and gaining language competence.

The overseas engagements of U.S. institutions and organizations are vital to meeting this expanded understanding of international learning. They bring experts and newcomers together, provoke interdisciplinary synergies, and combine experiential and classroom learning. They institutionally model the collaborative international engagement that students must now master, while providing a laboratory for students to practice doing this. They are incubators for faculty growth and curricular developments that will benefit students on site and also back at the home campus. And they connect U.S. institutions in meaningful, mutually beneficial, and sustained ways with their counterparts overseas, ways that produce ever-deepening knowledge and generate new and unexpected collaborations.

Those overseas operations that do such things best operate on the basis of local embeddedness, knowledge, and respect; view long-term international relationships as equal to any particular project; organize the home institution so it can sustain such operations over time; intensify the opportunities for experiential learning; and recognize overseas operations as a desired source of transformation for both U.S. and overseas partners.

On-the-ground overseas operations are an emerging and critical facet of U.S. higher education and there is much that colleges and universities, as well as the agencies and foundations that support higher education can do to enhance them. As much of this support should be toward the development of the infrastructure and long-term processes that enable such overseas operations to succeed, as toward any specific project.