

**Internationalization at an Historically Black College  
Bennett College for Women  
A Case Study**

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**Introduction**

Bennett College is a small, private, historically black, four year liberal arts college in Greensboro, North Carolina. Founded in 1873 as a coeducational institution for recently freed slaves in affiliation with the Methodist Church, Bennett was reorganized in 1926 as a college for women. It is one of only two colleges in the United States for black women and it is accredited by the Commission on Colleges of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS).

Bennett has had a long-standing history of global engagement. For purposes of this paper, I will begin with the 1950s during the administration of Bennett's first female president, Dr. Willa B. Player. During this period, educators and students from other countries were present on Bennett's campus on a regular basis and Bennett students and faculty regularly went abroad.

**The 1950s and the 1960s**

Dr. Linda Brown (1998), in her book, *The Long Walk*, on the presidency of Dr. Willa B. Player (1956-1966), states that Bennett was among the first colleges in the South to encourage the admission of foreign students. She goes on to state:

Bennett College was one of those places which recognized that empowering its students for moving into the world should include exposure to different kinds of people. From 1955 to 1964, a total of 46 students representing 18 countries were enrolled at the College. The places represented were: American Samoa, Bombay State India, Flatts, Bermuda, Germany, Ghana, Jamaica, Kenya, Liberia, Nassau Bahamas, Nigeria, Pago Pago Tuluila, Panama, Seoul Korea, Sierra Leone, Sumatra Surinam, South America, Thailand and the Virgin Islands (p. 136).

Brown also indicates that students came to Bennett from Japan, China and Iran and that between 1953 and 1963 there were visiting international faculty at Bennett from Poland, South Africa, Southern Rhodesia [now Zimbabwe], Kenya and England (p. 137).

In a letter dated September 13, 1961, Dr. Player responded to a letter she received questioning the suitability of an American education for a student preparing for a career in Africa. She received the letter after the writer read an article in the *Christian Science Monitor* about an incoming Bennett student from Sierra Leone:

You will be pleased to know that Bennett College has pioneered in the education of students, particularly young women at the undergraduate level from Africa. It happens that our program is designed rather uniquely for young women and, with minor adjustments, we have been able to meet the needs for those who are returning to their respective countries for service in government and teaching. Our emphasis on leadership is particularly important in this respect (W. Player, personal communication, September 13, 1961).

In that same letter, Dr. Player writes of a delegation of 20 African women who would be coming to Bennett later that fall to observe Bennett's programs through the sponsorship of the International Cooperation Administration, an agency established by the U.S. Department of State:

Among them are two very distinguished women educators from Sierra Leone. We had an opportunity to meet them last March since they were members of a workshop which six other Americans and myself were directing as a means of exploring the needs of the education of women in the emerging independent countries of Africa (W. Player, personal communication, September 13, 1961).

Not only was Bennett receiving the world on its campus, Bennett students were actively engaged in study and work abroad. It was tradition for many years to acknowledge on Bennett's Commencement programs the post-graduation plans of its students. The following acknowledgements are a sample of what was occurring during the 1950s:

80th Commencement, June 1, 1953

Scholarship for study at the University of Oslo, Norway, Summer 1953

Scholarship to study at the University of Stockholm, Sweden, 1953-54

82nd Commencement, May 30, 1955

Fulbright to study at Ruprecht Karls University, Heidelberg, Germany, 1955-56

83rd Commencement, May 28, 1956

Fulbright Fellowship, University of Bordeaux, France, 1956-57

Fulbright Assistantship, Ranke Schule-Free University, Berlin, Germany, 1956-57

This aspect of global engagement continued in the 1960s and the following acknowledgements

of students' post-graduation plans are samples of note:

89th Commencement, June 4, 1962

Peace Corps appointment, Cameroon, West Africa

Eastern European Scholars (3), Summer 1962

90th Commencement, June 3, 1963

Peace Corps appointment, Philippines

91<sup>st</sup> Commencement, June 1, 1964

Peace Corps appointment Caracas, Venezuela

Peace Corps appointment British Honduras

Peace Corps appointment Ethiopia

Peace Corps appointment Malaysia

Experiment in International Living Scholarship, Brazil

93<sup>rd</sup> Commencement, June 6, 1966

Educational Exchange Grant for Study in French Literature, Fulbright-Hays

University of Besancon, France

Crossroads Africa Summer Scholarship, NYC Missions Society, Tanzania

Peace Corps appointment, Ethiopia

Peace Corps appointment, Brazil

Peace Corps appointment, India

## The 1980s and the 1990s

The presidency of Dr. Gloria Randle Scott (1987-2001) was another noteworthy period of active global engagement at Bennett. In addition to the participation of Bennett students in exchange programs in Australia, Austria, El Salvador, Ghana, the United Kingdom and Zimbabwe, the administration, faculty and staff were involved in international professional activities in Canada, China, France, Ghana, Iran, Kenya, Russia, Singapore, South Africa, the United Kingdom and Zimbabwe (Scott, p. 37; Bennett College (1994, June), *The International Curriculum and Campus of Bennett College* [Brochure]). Dr. Scott was instrumental in the founding of Africa University (AU) in 1992 in Zimbabwe, as a United Methodist Church-affiliated, private institution, and she served as one of its founding directors and as Secretary of the AU Board of Directors (Felder, pp. 40 and 127). On the official opening of Africa University, Bennett was represented by several faculty, staff and students who participated in the inaugural celebration including several conference sessions titled *African Women and Higher Education; Reflections of Women Students at Africa University; Women's Access to Higher Education in Africa: Challenges and Prospects; and Gender Hurdles in Training African Women for Non-Traditional Careers* (Felder, p. 99). With support from the Coca-Cola Foundation, the Bennett College choir also participated in the ceremonies (Felder, p. 97).

In addition to these off-campus experiences, Dr. Scott and Dr. Charlotte Alston, Bennett's Vice President for Academic Affairs, were clear that curricula innovations were also needed in order to achieve the level of global education that was desired (C. Alston, personal communication, January 16, 1991). Guided by Dr. Dan Figgins, as the project director, and other faculty on a steering committee, Bennett faculty members were encouraged to introduce an international education module in each of their courses. A documented, written curriculum plan

was to be developed by spring 1991 comparing the specific discipline as practiced in the United States with an African or other Third World country, or demonstrating the world-wide applicability of the discipline. The program was modeled after "Writing across the Curriculum" and was a method for internationalizing the college curriculum by requiring readings, lectures, and class discussions in one to four class periods in each course offered at the college. The goal was to demonstrate that the subject matter of the course could be applied globally and that the world is interdependent. A plan for implementation was developed titled *Internationalizing the Curriculum and Campus: A Strategic Plan from 1993-94 through 1997-98*.

The faculty at Bennett in 1992-93 was diverse with the following countries of origin: Chile, Ghana, India, Jamaica, Nigeria, Palestine, Persia, Sierra Leone and South America. Dr. Figgins, a political science professor and retired U. S. Foreign Service officer, had lived and worked in four Latin American, one African, and two European countries (Bennett College (1994, June), *The International Curriculum and Campus of Bennett College* [Brochure]).

The foundation was clearly in place to implement this curriculum-wide program. In 1987, President Scott served as a member of a commission which published *The United States Prepares for its Future: Global Perspectives in Education* and in that same year the college secured a Title VI grant to develop an international studies program. Dr. Scott was one of the founders of the North Carolina Consortium for International and Intercultural Education (NCCIIIE), which currently consists of five North Carolina Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and annually coordinates the Model United Nations. In conjunction with NCCIIIE, Bennett sponsored two significant networking and professional development conferences in 1989-1990: a workshop for NCCIIIE faculties at which faculty members from a Maryland consortium of HBCUs briefed the North Carolina faculties on their trips to Africa to

collect materials for international awareness modules across the curriculum and a South Eastern United States Conference on Internationalizing the Curriculum at HBCUs (D. Figgins, personal communication, July 6, 2009).

### **2002 to the Present**

Under the leadership of President Dr. Johnnetta B. Cole (2002-2007), Bennett appointed its first coordinator of international affairs in 2003, and with the support of a grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, set up the college's first centralized office to oversee and manage its global education initiatives. The coordinator, Dr. Bheki Langa, a faculty member from South Africa, taught classes in his discipline and was a staff of one for purposes of coordinating Bennett's international programming. A notable achievement during this time was the institution of a global studies minor and certificate program in 2005, which consisted of course offerings in each of the three academic divisions of the college—Humanities; Social Sciences and Education; and Natural and Behavioral Sciences/Mathematics.

Since that time, the college has steadily improved the coordination of its global engagements, which are currently overseen by the staff of the Center for Global Studies which consists of a director, an associate director, an administrative assistant and student workers. The center's responsibilities are both academic and administrative with reporting structures to the Office of the Provost and to the Department of History, Philosophy, Religion and Interdisciplinary Studies in the Division of Humanities. The center has oversight of the global studies minor and certificate programs; study abroad; support of international students and scholars; and international programming, such as coordination of activities for International Education Week. Money to support the center's work is provided totally by grants and presidential discretionary federal funds. Each president since Dr. Cole has designated global

education as a priority academic area and it is one of four academic focal points specifically identified in the college's current five-year Strategic Plan (2012-2017), approved by the Board of Trustees under the leadership of President Julianne Malveaux (2007-2012). The focus on global studies continued under President Esther Terry (2012-2013) and clearly has been articulated as priority under the leadership of President Rosalind Fuse-Hall (2013 – present).

The presence of degree-seeking international students at Bennett has not been as robust in this period as was the case in the 1950s and 60s. However, our partnerships since 2009 with the Undergraduate Exchange Programs through the International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX) and World Learning have placed non-degree students at Bennett from Indonesia, Kazakhstan, Nicaragua, Pakistan, the Philippines, Russia and Turkmenistan.

Beginning in 2009, Bennett has been a placement site for foreign language teaching assistants (FLTAs) through the U.S. Department of State for critical and less commonly taught languages (Arabic, Kiswahili and Turkish). Critical languages have been offered as well through IREX (Russian) and Alliance for Language Learning and Educational Exchange (ALLEX) (Chinese). These partnerships have been essential for Bennett to offer critical and less commonly taught language courses in addition to its regular offerings of French and Spanish.

Most recently, during 2012-2014, the U.S. Department of Education has supported an Arabic Language and Culture Program at Bennett through its Undergraduate International Studies and Foreign Language Programs (UISFL). Through this grant, Bennett has been able to offer Islamic history and culture courses, as well as Arabic language courses from elementary through intermediate. During summer 2013 (and planned for summer 2014), two intensive summer sessions of Arabic were offered. These courses were free of charge to the Greater Greensboro public, in addition to the Bennett community.

Bennett has also established a Rosetta Stone (self-guided) Language Laboratory with Arabic, Chinese, French, Portuguese and Spanish. The lab is located in the Center for Global Studies and is available daily from 8-5 PM.

Other important partnerships that have helped advanced Bennett's global capacity as well are the American Council on Education, the Faculty Resource Network at New York University, the Salzburg (Austria) Global Seminar and the Stone Center at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill.

Through the coordinated effort of the United Methodist Church in 2011, and augmented by additional donations since then, the Center for Global Studies currently provides passport scholarships to Bennett students. The ultimate goal is to become an "all passport campus" with the expectation that incoming students will have or get a passport as one of their entry requirements.

Other international activities of note that are currently underway at Bennett through grant funding are a one week global citizenship program for honor students in Salzburg, Austria; a service learning project connecting students with refugee and immigrant communities in Greensboro; and course offerings in Islamic history and culture and in Arabic, Chinese and Kiswahili.

### **Summary**

A good foundation for internationalization of Bennett has been laid by the enhancement of the curriculum in courses with global content, by the offering of critical and less commonly taught languages, by the global professional development opportunities for faculty and staff, by global experiences available for students and by the presence and active engagement of international students and scholars on campus. These strides have been possible through

Bennett's partnerships with a variety of larger, more resourced institutions and through private and federal grants. As a tuition-driven institution, with 89% of its students eligible for Pell grants (making them the most needy of college students for federal aid), Bennett would not have had these successes without partnerships. A continuing challenge is to find financial resources to support the programs and activities that are needed.

Building on its rich history, Bennett has fully embraced the goal to increase minority participation in international education. A related goal is providing additional avenues for Bennett students to be exposed to and prepared for international careers and for prestigious international affairs scholarships, pre- and post-graduation. There is a clearly delivered message from Bennett's senior administration that global education is a priority. However, operational funds are limited and the majority of the work that has been achieved has been through external funding and partnerships.

As demonstrated in this case study, Bennett's commitment to be a leader in increasing minority participation in the global arena is evident. This goal, however, will only be achieved with intentional initiatives of the federal government and other public and private sources to provide the funds for structuring meaningful partnerships, especially between differently resourced institutions. The most critical components for successful internationalization of Bennett's campus are (1) clearly articulated institutional commitment at the highest levels of the administration; (2) appropriate structures and staffing to carry out programs and activities; (3) curricula and co-curricula components; (4) partnerships with various external institutions; and (5) financial resources to underwrite global education programs.

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