

# Public Opinion Poll

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## One Year Later

### Attitudes About International Education Since September 11

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#### Executive Summary

September 11 raised important questions about how colleges and universities educate students for global citizenship, their role in producing experts in languages and area studies essential to national security, and how their tradition of welcoming students from other countries might evolve. Public attitudes and opinions surrounding these questions will have serious consequences for higher education. Thus, in spring 2002, the American Council on Education (ACE) undertook a survey to examine whether public attitudes about international education have changed since September 11 and, if so, how. This survey replicated many questions from a 2000 survey that examined the public's attitudes about international education, international experience, and knowledge of international issues and events. Attitudinal questions also were included on two other national surveys conducted by ACE, a faculty and an undergraduate survey. Three general conclusions emerged.

- Overall public, student, and faculty support for international education and language training remain very high. Survey results indicate that the decrease in public support many feared would happen after September 11 generally has not occurred. Public support for foreign language learning is particularly strong, even when asked if they would support an increase in state funding for foreign language learning.
- The public, students, and faculty are very supportive of international course requirements, including foreign language and international course requirements.
- Not only has overall support remained strong and steady, but also the intensity of support has increased

in several areas, including foreign language training. Those who indicated that they "somewhat" support international education activities and requirements now indicate that they "strongly" support them.

However, the surveys also show that, in some areas and for some specific groups, the public has concerns. Areas of specific concern include study abroad and international students and international scholars on campus. While there is generally strong support for these activities and groups, that support decreases when respondents are asked how likely they are to encourage a family member to participate in study abroad or about international students and scholars at their local institutions. These concerns are

most evident among older respondents. Higher education institutions will need to address these concerns to ensure continued support for international education opportunities on and off campus.

In both public opinion surveys, minorities demonstrated strong support for and interest in international education. Given that historically, minorities have not participated in international education activities to a great extent, this could indicate that institutions will need to use new strategies to turn this interest into participation.

Institutions should consider expanding their role in educating the public about international issues. Survey respondents believe that colleges and universities have a responsibility to educate the public about international issues, events, and cultures. However, many felt that their own education did not adequately give them the knowledge to understand fully current international events. Institutions should reach out to the larger community and improve their strategies for meeting this need.

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## Introduction

During the last year, the public has been frequently reminded that September 11, 2001, was a defining moment for the United States. It was also a defining moment for U.S. higher education. September 11 raised important questions about how colleges and universities educate students for global citizenship, their role in producing experts in languages and area studies essential to national security, and how their tradition of welcoming students from other countries might evolve. Public attitudes and opinions surrounding these questions will have serious consequences for higher education. Thus, the American Council on Education (ACE) undertook a survey to examine whether public attitudes about international education have changed since September 11 and, if so, how much.

In spring 2000, KRC Research conducted a survey for ACE to gauge the public's experience with and attitudes about international education, and its knowledge of international events and issues.<sup>1</sup> In an effort to see how the public's attitudes have changed, if at all, since the events of September 11, the Center for Survey Research and Analysis at the University of Connecticut re-fielded the 2000 survey for ACE in March 2002. The margin of error for both surveys is +/- 3.1. Some questions were modified or omitted from the 2000 survey, allowing us to specifically focus on attitudes about international education. Both were random-sample telephone surveys of more than 1,000 respondents, ages 18 and older. This brief report compares the results from the two surveys and suggests what the findings might mean for colleges and universities.

Additionally, this report includes a sample of findings from two other recent ACE surveys—a written survey of more than 1,000 postsecondary undergraduates and a telephone

survey of over 1,200 faculty members who have recently taught undergraduate students. Both surveys were conducted after September 11 and, like the earlier public surveys, contained attitudinal questions about international education. A full report on the student and faculty surveys will be published in fall 2002.

## Public News Awareness

The events of September 11 focused intense media attention on the world beyond U.S. borders. The media increased its coverage of and provided history and background on international events and key players. A year later, newspapers continue to report on outbreaks of violence in all regions of the Middle East, including Afghanistan, as well as specific tensions between countries such as Pakistan and India. It would seem hard to ignore the emphasis on international news. But have Americans been watching this increased coverage? Have they increased the extent to which they follow the news, international news in particular?

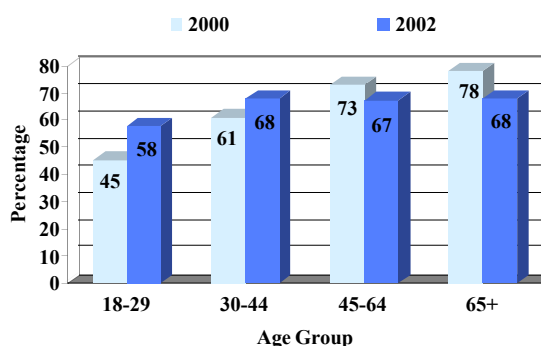
Overall public interest in and attention to news has changed little from 2000 to 2002. In the 2000 survey, 64 percent of respondents reported that they follow international news, 82 percent followed national news, and 89 percent followed state or local news. There was no significant change in 2002. These figures suggest that the number of people who

follow the news regularly has not increased since September 11, and that local news continues to be of primary interest to Americans.

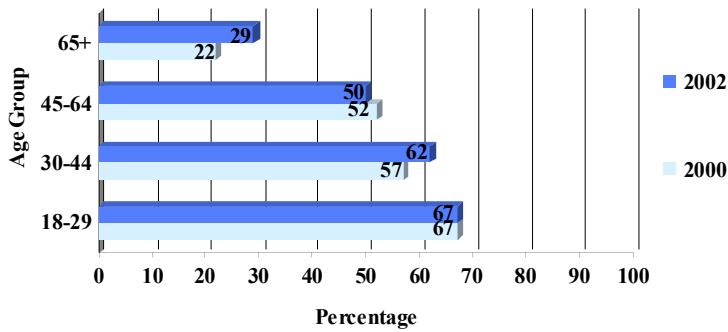
While international events may be the least likely news to capture the attention of Americans, there is some indication that those who do follow international news are now tracking it more intensely; the percentage of Americans who said they follow international news "very closely" increased from 20 to 27 percent from 2000 to 2002. The percentage of people who said they follow international news somewhat closely fell from 44 to 39 percent. Those who said they did not follow international news or did not follow it closely remained the same.

Both surveys found that Americans' interest in international news increases with level of education and age. A little more than 50 percent of respondents with a high school degree or less reported that they follow the international news either "very closely" or "somewhat closely," compared with more than 75 percent of college graduates. Younger people, those between 18 and 29 years of age, now appear to be more likely to follow international news since 2000. In the 2002 survey, 58 percent of 18- to 29-year-olds said they follow international news "very closely" or "somewhat closely," compared with 45 percent in 2000 (see Figure 1). While the share of young people saying they follow international news "very closely" increased slightly,

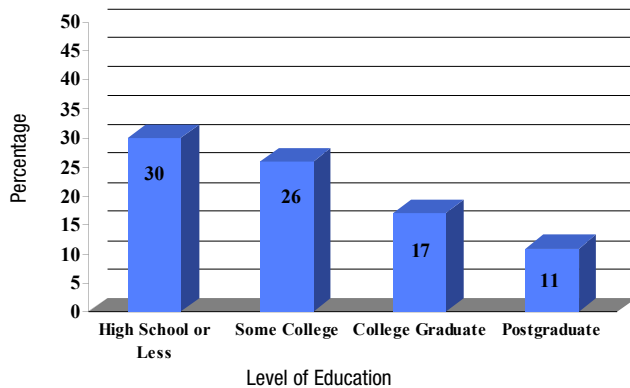
Figure 1: Those Who Follow International News, by Age



**Figure 2: Those Who Agree that Knowledge of International Issues Is Important for Their Career, by Age**



**Figure 3: Respondents Who Believe that Their Education Has Not Given Them the Knowledge to Fully Understand Current International Events**



the survey suggests that many of these have only recently begun to follow international news. The number of those between the ages of 18 and 29 who reported that they do not follow international news at all decreased by almost 10 percent between 2000 and 2002.

In an effort to gauge interest and exposure to news with differing perspectives, respondents to the 2002 survey also were asked how closely they follow news programs broadcast from other countries. Overall, only 22 percent of respondents reported that they follow reports produced in other countries either “very closely” or “somewhat closely.” More than 50 percent said they do not follow internationally produced news at all.

### Attitudes About the Importance of International Learning

The belief that globalization places new demands on the workplace is now so widely accepted that it is a cliché. But to what extent do Americans believe that knowledge of international issues is actually important to their careers or the careers of the country’s youth?

In the 2000 public opinion survey, 52 percent of all respondents said that knowledge about international issues would be important to their careers over the next 10 years. This figure was virtually unchanged in 2002. Also unchanged were the significant differences in age-related responses—younger people, those between 18 and 29 years of age, were much more likely to respond that

international issues would be important to their careers than those in older age groups (see Figure 2).

When asked how important knowledge about international issues would be to the careers of their children or other young people, the numbers increased dramatically. More than 90 percent of respondents in both surveys agreed that knowledge about international issues would be important to the careers of younger generations, with overwhelming agreement across ages, incomes, levels of education, and genders. These findings suggest that the public recognizes the importance of international knowledge, if not for themselves, then for their children and future generations.

### The Public’s Expectation of Higher Education

The 2002 survey asked whether colleges and universities have a responsibility to educate the public about international issues, events, and cultures. Nearly three out of four respondents, regardless of race, age, income, or education level, agreed that higher education has a responsibility to educate the public about international education, with 39 percent saying they strongly agree.

Of those responding, minorities were the most emphatic about higher education’s role in enhancing international awareness. Eighty percent said they agreed that higher education has a responsibility to provide education about international matters, with almost 50 percent “strongly agreeing.” In comparison, 70 percent of whites “agreed” with 33 percent “strongly agreeing.”

These sentiments signal a curious dichotomy, however, when compared with respondents’ opinions of their own educational experiences. Overall, one in four said their formal education did not give them the knowledge to fully understand current international events. While 30 percent of those with less schooling

Figure 4: Support for International Education Requirements

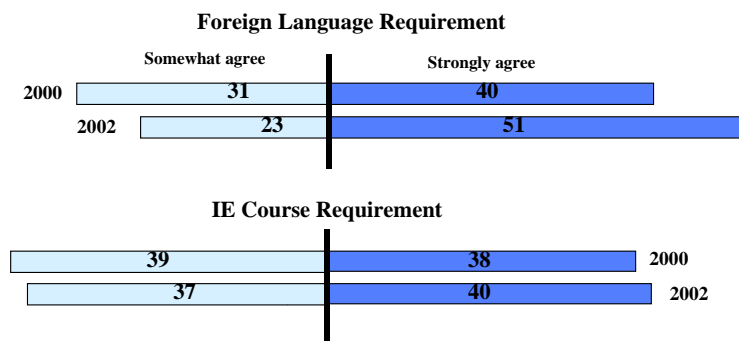
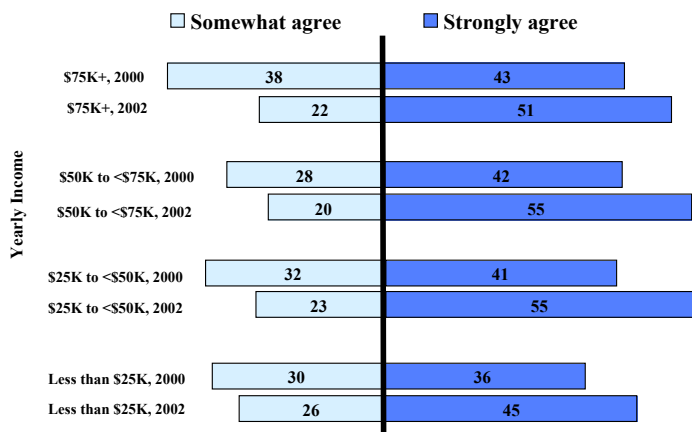


Figure 5: Those Who Support Foreign Language Requirements, by Income Group



agreed that their education did not prepare them to understand international events, 17 percent of college graduates felt the same way (see Figure 3). In sum, while the public looks to higher education institutions to provide international learning opportunities, there is some dissatisfaction with the level of knowledge about international events and issues that colleges and universities currently provide.

#### Support for International Education Course Requirements

Support for international education requirements remains strong and has not significantly changed since September 11. In 2000, 77 percent of the public supported a foreign language requirement in high school;

71 percent supported a college language requirement; and 77 percent supported an international course requirement in college. These findings support the results of an ACE/student POLL survey conducted in 2000 that showed strong support among high school seniors for foreign language and international courses. Of those responding to the ACE/student POLL survey, 57 percent said they planned to enroll in foreign language courses and 50 percent said they wanted to take an international course in college.<sup>2</sup>

After September 11, overall support for international education did not change much, but the intensity of support for international education increased in some areas. Eighty percent of the 2002 public survey

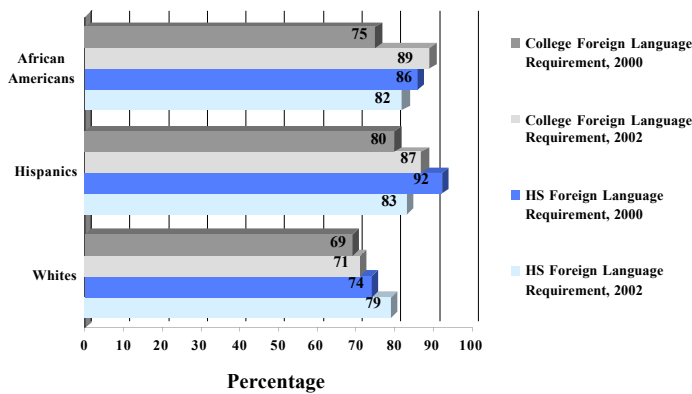
respondents supported a high school foreign language requirement, while 74 percent supported a college requirement, both increased by 3 percent since 2000. Support for international education courses was unchanged at 77 percent. When supporters of international education requirements are separated into groups of those who “strongly agree” and those who “somewhat agree,” it becomes evident that strong support for foreign language requirements has intensified (see Figure 4).

This shift in intensity of support for foreign language requirements is evident among all groups, regardless of age, educational attainment, or income (see Figure 5).

The increased support for foreign language requirements is particularly striking among minorities. In 2000, 36 percent of whites reported that they strongly support foreign language requirements in college, compared with 52 percent of minorities. In 2002, this support increased to 45 percent among whites and 63 percent among minorities. While both groups exhibited an increase, minorities consistently indicated stronger support for foreign language requirements in both surveys (see Figure 6).

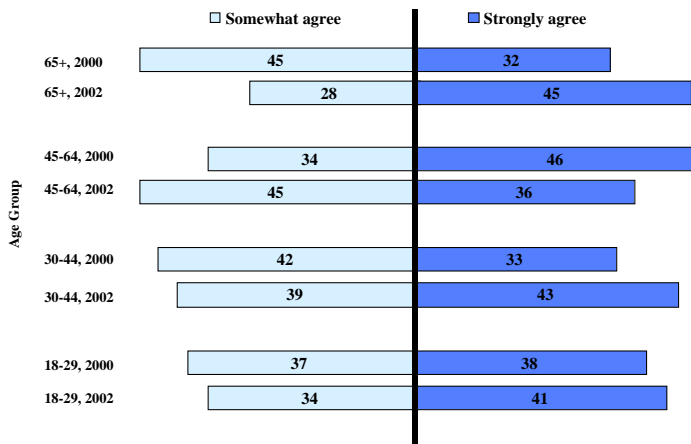
Overall, the findings demonstrate widespread support for foreign language education. An additional question asked on the 2002 survey underscores this support. The survey asked respondents how likely they were to back increased state funding for foreign language education at their local college or university since September 11. More than 40 percent said they were more likely to favor an increase, with almost half of those saying they were much more likely to do so. Slightly over 25 percent indicated they were less likely to favor an increase in state funding since September 11. Respondents who were the most likely to say they were “much more” or “somewhat more” likely to favor an increase in state

Figure 6: Support for Foreign Language Requirements, by Ethnicity



College and university student interest in international courses has risen since September 11. In a new ACE survey, undergraduates were asked, “Compared to before September 11, how likely are you to take elective courses that focus on other countries, cultures, or global issues?” More than one-third responded that they were more likely to do so. Together, these findings suggest a significant level of support for institutions to enhance their international education and foreign language opportunities.

Figure 7: Support for International Course Requirements, by Age Group



Attitudes Toward Study Abroad

Many college and university leaders were fearful that September would have a devastating impact on study-abroad participation. Anecdotal evidence suggests an opposite trend, however, with increases in student interest in exchange reported by some institutions.

The 2000 survey found strong public support for study abroad. Seventy-five percent of respondents agreed that students should have a study-abroad experience sometime during college; more than one-third of this group strongly agreed. After September 11, 79 percent agreed, with just over 40 percent strongly agreeing. It appears that the public’s overall support for study abroad has not been diminished by the events of September 11. Instead, there has been a slight, positive shift in both overall support and intensity of support. This is true regardless of ethnicity, gender, income, or level of education.

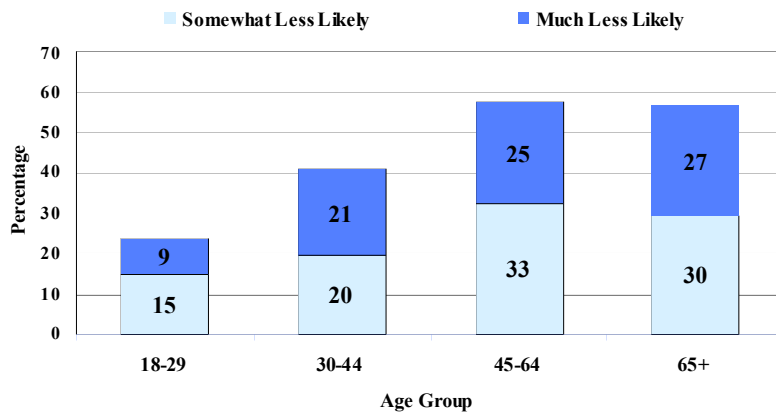
funding for foreign language education include minorities (African Americans, 57 percent, and Hispanics, 49 percent, compared with whites, 36 percent); those earning less than \$50,000 (46 percent); and those under 30 years of age (47 percent).

Increases in those who strongly support international course requirements are much less dramatic, and in many instances there has been no overall change. In 2000, 77 percent of the public supported international course requirements in college. In 2002, the percentage remained the same. Of those that indicated support in international course requirements, more than half acknowledged that they “strongly agree.” No noteworthy differences emerge among

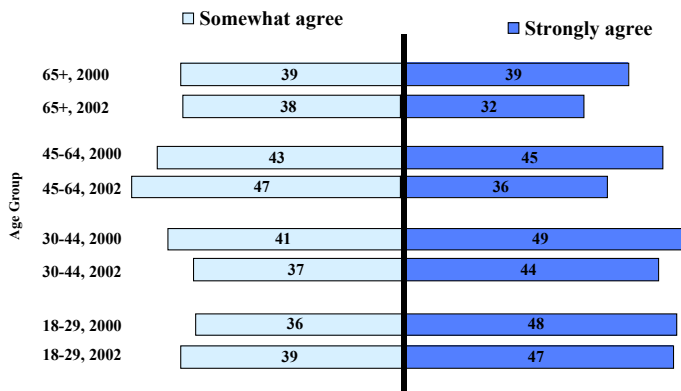
ethnic and income groups. Age was a factor, however, among respondents who indicated strong support for international course requirements. There was a 10 percent increase among respondents between the ages of 30 and 44 who reported that they “strongly” support international course requirements (see Figure 7). Surprisingly, strong support for international course requirements among those in the 45- to 64-year-old age group decreased by 10 percent, although total support remained about the same. As previously seen, increases are primarily in the level of intensity, with overall support for international course requirements remaining high among the public.

But support for study abroad remains somewhat conditional. The 2002 survey asked respondents, “Since the events of September 11, how likely are you to encourage a family member to study abroad?” More than 40 percent said they were less likely, and almost half of these said they were much less likely. Hesitancy to encourage students to study abroad increases with age and

**Figure 8: Respondents Reporting They Are Less Likely to Encourage a Family Member to Study Abroad Since September 11, by Age Group**



**Figure 9: Respondents Who Agree International Students Enrich the Learning Experience, by Age Group**



is especially evident among those older than 45 (see Figure 8), a finding that suggests parents might be reluctant to encourage their children or family members to study abroad.

Examining results by gender, the surveys reveal that women are less likely to encourage a family member to study abroad than men. Whereas 38 percent of men said they were less likely to encourage a family member to study abroad since September 11, 50 percent of women reported they were less likely, and more than 20 percent of them said they were much less likely to do so. These findings indicate that while the public supports study abroad in the

abstract, they may harbor personal reservations about it.

As with international education requirements, minorities demonstrate particularly strong support for study abroad. In the 2002 survey, 90 percent of African-American and 83 percent of Hispanic respondents agreed that students should have a study abroad experience while in college, compared with 76 percent of whites. Unfortunately, statistics on study abroad show that few minority students actually do engage in such an experience.

When asked how likely they would be to encourage a family member to study abroad since September 11, more than 40 percent of minority

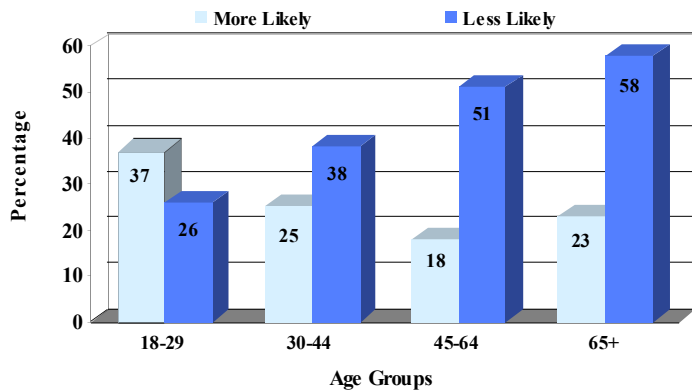
respondents said they would be more likely to do so, compared with just 14 percent of whites. Half of all African-American respondents said they would be “more likely” to encourage a family member to study abroad.

What about the students themselves? Preliminary findings of a 2002 ACE survey of undergraduate students reveal that 60 percent of undergraduates agreed that all students should have a study-abroad experience sometime during their college or university careers. This strong support for study abroad is mirrored in the studentPOLL survey that found that 48 percent of high school seniors planning to enroll in four-year colleges said they hoped to study abroad during college.

However, the ACE student survey also found that more than 25 percent of students surveyed after September 11 reported that they would be less likely to study abroad; more than 60 percent thought they would be just as likely, while less than 10 percent said they would be more likely to do so. One-third of female students said they would be less likely to study abroad, compared with 21 percent of males. The majority of women and men reported that they are just as likely now to study abroad as they were prior to September 11; most have not altered their level of interest. These findings indicate continued strong overall support for study abroad, but do not confirm the increase in student interest reported by some institutions. They also suggest that, for some students, September 11 has negatively affected their willingness to study abroad.

ACE also surveyed approximately 1,000 college faculty and found that more than 50 percent agreed that undergraduate students should have a study-abroad experience before they graduate, with almost 30 percent strongly agreeing. Only 12 percent of the faculty reported that September 11 has made them less

**Figure 10: How Likely Are You to Support an Increase in the Number of International Students and Scholars at Your Local College?**



likely to advise students to study abroad.

Overall, public, student, and faculty support remains strong and stable for study abroad, even though a small number of respondents in each survey reported that they were less likely to encourage students to study abroad. Institutions no doubt will need to address those reservations, particularly among the parental age group (those older than 45). This group could affect the extent to which undergraduates are able to participate in study abroad, regardless of student interest. It is also evident that some female students have concerns about study abroad and these concerns also need to be alleviated, especially given that female students traditionally account for the majority of exchange participants.

#### Attitudes About International Students and Scholars on Campus

Both public surveys asked respondents their opinions about international students on campus and the results show strong overall support for international students. Eighty percent of the 2002 survey respondents agreed that the presence of international students on U.S. campuses enriches the learning experience for American students, with

40 percent strongly agreeing. Age, income, and education level did not affect support for international students and scholars. Opinion has slightly shifted among people who previously “strongly agreed” that international students enrich the learning experience; more now report that they “somewhat agree.” This shift is particularly evident among older respondents (see Figure 9).

The 2002 findings indicate that while overall support for international students remains strong, it is somewhat conditional. In the 2002 survey, respondents were asked how likely they would be to support an increase in the number of international students and scholars at their local college or university since September 11. While 25 percent said they would be more likely, 42 percent said they would be less likely to do so. Opinion was likewise divided on international collaboration—almost one-third of respondents said they would be less likely to support expanding international partnerships between local colleges and colleges in other countries, with another one-third saying they would be more likely to support an increase in international partnerships.

People under 30 and minorities were the most likely to support an

increase in the number of international students and scholars (see Figure 10). Respondents under 30 years of age were more likely to support an increase in the number of international students and scholars on campus, compared with those over 30 years of age. Minorities also were twice as likely as white respondents to support an increase.

Younger respondents and minorities also were more supportive of expanding partnerships between their local college or university and an institution overseas. For example, 39 percent of those under age 30 said they would support expanding international linkages, compared with 29 percent of those over age 45. Likewise, 43 percent of minorities favored expanding linkages, compared with 30 percent of whites.

The 2002 student survey mirrored the strong support found in the public survey. The student survey found that respondents were very positive about the value of international students on campus—almost 90 percent of students agreed that international students enrich the learning experience. Nearly one-third of students said they have been more likely to have a conversation with an international student or scholar on campus since September 11.

It is a little surprising, therefore, to find that 20 percent of students, and just over 10 percent of faculty, said they were less likely to support an increase in the number of international students and scholars on campus. Less than 15 percent of students said they were more likely to support an increase. Curiously, for many students and faculty, support for the diversity that international students and scholars bring to campus has not translated into support for increasing the number of international students and scholars on their own campuses.

Generally, younger people and minorities are the most supportive of

international students and scholars. Americans over the age of 45 are less supportive of international students and scholars on their local campuses. The majority of students and faculty do not perceive a need to increase the number of international students, international scholars, or partnerships with institutions overseas.

### Conclusion

Overall, public support for international education remains strong since September 11 and, in some areas, has increased in intensity. Among those who support international education requirements and activities, some have shifted from being somewhat supportive in 2000 to being strongly supportive in 2002. This is especially evident among those who support foreign language requirements.

But populations do differ. Support among younger people has increased in many areas, as it has among minorities. But support among older Americans has diminished for some international activities. This pattern is most evident regarding support for study abroad and the presence of international students and scholars on campus. Foreign language requirements and increased state funding for foreign language education are areas that draw overwhelming support across all groups.

These data have important implications for college and university leaders as they promote international learning on their campuses. First, the existence of widespread public support for international education should encourage campuses to forge ahead in bringing global perspectives to their students. The strong support for foreign language learning should be especially heartening, and the priority given international learning among young people, especially with regard to foreign language study and study abroad, is good news indeed for colleges and universities.

However, support in the abstract does not necessarily translate into personal action. While interest in study abroad and agreement that international students and scholars enhance the learning environment on campus are generally high, many respondents demonstrated less enthusiasm when the questions were directly related to their own families or communities. People older than 45 are especially likely to express support for study abroad or international students while indicating at the same time that they would not encourage a family member to study abroad or support additional international students on their own local campus. Likewise, female students are supportive of the idea that all students should have a study-abroad experience while at the same time some demonstrating personal hesitation to participate. These personal reservations could reflect concerns about security, but institutions need to investigate further so that their leaders can directly address these concerns.

While there is little corroborating evidence, anecdotal or otherwise, these surveys indicate that minorities are very supportive of all facets of international education. Given that so few minorities study abroad, it was surprising to find, in both surveys, consistently solid support for international education among minorities. And yet, institutions generally do not have strategies that target minority groups. Institutions need to encourage and support minority interest. Strategies must be found to leverage their interest and translate it into greater participation in international education programs and activities.

Finally, institutions should consider expanding their role in educating the public about international issues. While the public expresses interest overall, few people follow international events closely, and

many believe that their education has not adequately prepared them to do so. It is clear that the public believes it is higher education's responsibility to help Americans gain knowledge about international events and issues. Higher education institutions have an opportunity to ensure that this happens. Expanding into the community and providing the public with increased knowledge about international events and issues could pay significant dividends to the institution, the local community, and society at large.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Hayward, Fred and Laura Siaya. *Public Experience, Attitudes, and Knowledge: A Report on Two National Surveys About International Education*. Washington, DC: American Council on Education, 2001.

<sup>2</sup> Art & Science Group. *Student POLL*. 4 (3). Baltimore, MD: 2001.

To obtain additional information about this survey or other ACE projects on international education, visit the ACE web site at [www.acenet.edu](http://www.acenet.edu) or contact:

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