The Future of International Exchanges in a Post-Pandemic World

Introduction

THE FUTURE OF INTERNATIONAL EXCHANGES IN A POST-PANDEMIC WORLD

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Introduction

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This volume has two purposes. The first is to provide an overview of the current state of international exchanges, with a focus on the bilateral relationship between the United States and the European Union. The second is to envision the world of international exchange after the pandemic has subsided and we have returned to some version of a steady state.

The initial conversations that led to this project began with a focus on government-funded exchanges. While government programs remain centrally important, both in terms of the volume of funding and the number of participants, the other chapters in this volume will expand our scope to include self-funded and privately funded exchanges. As our authors will illustrate with examples and case studies, an exclusive focus on government-funded exchanges would ignore much of the dynamism and creativity that is taking place in this field.

This broader scope poses some challenges when it comes to defining international exchanges. For purposes of this publication, we define international exchange as any designed activity that supports the physical movement of individuals across national borders with the goal of advancing personal or professional development. Participants can be scholars (Chapters 1 and 3), mid-career professionals (Chapter 2), or students (Chapters 4 and 5). Although some of these programs are true exchanges, with individuals moving in opposite directions between two locations, this volume does not use that definition.

Several authors will explore the boundaries of this definition. Some will challenge the focus on the participant as the primary beneficiary; the sending organization may also hope to benefit from the participant's enhanced expertise after they have completed the exchange. Similarly, the organization that hosts the individual may hope to benefit, perhaps in the form of a research project that addresses a defined problem or challenge (see Chapter 5). The benefits to organizations are especially hard to measure. Many organizations would state that an experience that directly benefits the participating individual will also benefit their organization in some way, but they have no way of testing that assumption. Finally, by centering on physical mobility, our definition does not include virtual exchanges. This issue is explored more fully in Chapter 4.

My definition also assumes that international exchanges are intentionally designed. Chapter 3, which addresses international research collaboration, will explore that assumption. Many international research collaborations are in fact intentionally designed; in the US, the National Science Foundation and other funding agencies financially support this approach, and they require detailed proposals that describe how the collaboration will take place. Nevertheless, other successful exchanges are spontaneous, growing out of serendipitous encounters that are facilitated by the exchange of paper drafts, conferences, shared data sets, and other forms of interaction. The policies and practices that support these activities are best described as enabling. They include funding and administrative support for travel, technology support, legal counsel, the negotiating of institutional agreements, and performance evaluations that recognize the additional risk and uncertainty of collaboration across national borders. My own experience as a university administrator suggests that modest institutional investments in these support systems can produce substantial returns; the mere existence of a modest funding source on a university campus can have an important signaling effect.

This project began during the worst pandemic in a century. As these papers were being written, two pieces of conventional wisdom have now informed professional life in the United States. The first is that professionals of all types are now much more adept and comfortable with the use of technology in all aspects of their work, and particularly when it comes to interpersonal communication and collaboration. The second is that personal and organizational productivity in this new environment is comparable to our pre-pandemic work environments, and in some cases it is greater. In the field of education, universities have quickly adapted to delivering instruction in a virtual environment, although it may be premature to assess the effectiveness of this new approach in terms of student learning. Student access and scheduling flexibility have always been the strengths of online education, but the pandemic has also exposed the lack of internet access in the United States. While the problem is especially acute at the K–12 level, thousands of university students do not have access to the internet at adequate speed, and in other cases they do not have the necessary equipment or a quiet, private location to participate in classes. It may be several years before these pieces of conventional wisdom are rigorously tested and verified.

I asked each of the authors to address the question of how the pandemic will affect their particular mode of exchange. Each has a thoughtful, detailed response to my question; after we publish this volume, we will organize a series of webinars that will engage the broader international education community in a discussion about the future of our field. But the current assessment by each of the authors is clear: all affirm the value of face-to-face interaction. Learning to collaborate using technology as an explicit programmatic goal is discussed in detail in Chapters 4 and 5.

I also asked each author to address the question of evaluation, or how they measure the impact of their mode of exchange. Paradoxically, the results were both inspiring and sobering. All of the chapters in this volume have stories about program participants who gained personally from international exchanges. Other examples will demonstrate how exchanges benefited their home or host organization. In still other cases, we will see how exchanges contribute to the public good through knowledge creation (Chapter 3) or a better-informed public (Chapter 2). For those of us in the field of international education, these stories inspire us and affirm the value of our profession. Everyone in the field of international education, myself included, has their favorite story about an exchange participant who has used their experience to make the world a better place.

When read together, however, these papers will also suggest that stories and anecdotes are not enough. A more rigorous, systematic approach to program evaluation will help to increase financial resources, public support, and program participants. From my perspective, we have been living on borrowed time. A major setback to our profession in the past decade was the massive cut in funding for Title VI, the program under the U.S. Department of Education that supports area studies and other international programs on US campuses. While there are many explanations as to how the cuts were made, one clear weakness of these programs was a lack of rigorous evaluation. I was the director of a Title VI center for international business education at the time, and I was actively involved in a project that was designed to provide better performance data. There were many challenges, however. For one, the authorizing legislation had broad objectives, and each grant recipient was encouraged to take a creative approach to designing their programs. The result was a wide variety of audiences, learning objectives, and modes of delivery. What was a strength of these programs became a liability when it came to defining and measuring success. Some argued that the solution was to focus on a limited number of activities, but some institutions found this threatening when their flagship programs were not included in the shorter list of targeted activities. From this I learned that outwardly benign attempts at program evaluation can be perceived as threatening to many; even the hint that the results could be used to rank (and potentially cull) grant recipients would only make matters worse.

Stories and anecdotes are still very effective, and every program director should continue to collect them. For several years I had the privilege to serve on the board of directors of the Alliance for International Exchange, an organization that advocates for exchanges funded or formally authorized by the US government, including the Fulbright program discussed in Chapter 1. These programs enjoyed remarkable bipartisan support throughout the Trump presidency; as the White House argued for massive cuts to these programs or even outright elimination, Congress maintained or even increased funding. The White House eventually gained political advantage during the pandemic by arguing that some exchange participants were putting Americans out of work, and an executive order eventually denied entry into the US for several of these programs.

Another challenge with program evaluation is the need to articulate program outcomes clearly and simply. The nuances and complications that occupy our daily professional lives are unlikely to matter to the private foundation executives, Congressional staffers, federal research agencies, and the many others who ultimately control the resources that determine the design and scale of exchange programs. To take one encouraging example from Chapter 3, the fraction of articles that are published in leading academic journals and authored by teams of international collaborators has risen steadily for several decades. When this aggregate statistic is coupled with examples of scientific breakthroughs that have directly benefited the general public—such as a vaccine for COVID-19—then the value of international exchange is brought into sharp and vivid focus.

Among program administrators—and I count myself as guilty as charged—program evaluation is often perceived as a cost rather than an investment. When funding agencies mandate program evaluation, or if we are compelled to do evaluations in response to actual or potential attacks from critics, then it is easy to fall into cost mode, where the goal is to respond to the immediate pressure at the lowest cost. A more strategic approach sees program evaluation as a tool for innovation, with analyses that can lead to better program design, better program outcomes, new approaches for advocacy, and new sources of funding.

When done the right way, program evaluation is challenging, especially when it is retroactively applied to existing programs. To take one example, existing studies of program impact usually lack a value-added approach, where participants are tested before and after the study-abroad experience. Given that many program participants have already received high-quality education throughout their academic careers, including instruction that is designed to prepare them for spending time in another country, we should not be surprised that testing only after the experience supports the claim that these programs are successful.

And finally, we have the challenge of performance indicators that are overly ambitious. These programmatic goals may be set by political appointees or other officials who are not familiar with the structure of these programs. When I was a Title VI director at the University of Michigan, my team and I were asked to demonstrate how our programming in international business education was contributing to the overall competitiveness of the US, including but not limited to an increase in exports. While this was and continues to be a desirable outcome for Title VI programs, it was also impossible to establish a causal link between our programs and this policy goal. Chapters 1 and 4 will offer some encouragement here: several scholars and practitioners are working on performance indicators that will find the right balance between analytical rigor and policy impact.

The five chapters cover a broad variety of exchanges. In Chapter 1, Ray Mitic provides us with a detailed case study of the Fulbright program, a government-funded exchange program that has enjoyed broad political support on both sides of the Atlantic since it was created after the Second World War. Mitic is a trained scholar whose chosen field is international education, and his historical perspective provides a framework for the entire volume. He makes the important point that publicly funded exchanges are a relatively new idea, with self-funding or other private subsidies being the norm until the 20th century. This points to a research opportunity in our field: to explore the impact and educational potential of all types of physical mobility, including job changes and transfers, direct enrollment in educational institutions, and other immigration categories. The academic field of international human resource management has already pursued this course by studying the impact of intra-organizational overseas assignments on professional and personal development.

Mitic also points out that the image of the United States has deteriorated worldwide and especially within the European Union. Restoring a more positive image of the United States is one of the stated goals of the new American president, Joseph Biden; rethinking official exchanges like Fulbright as part of a broader campaign to restore goodwill toward the US makes good policy sense. But my comments about potential overreach in program evaluation may apply here—there is some risk that overly ambitious program goals will lead to evaluation results that lack rigor or credibility.

Mitic introduces the equity issue, which is picked up by Melissa Torres and Amelia Dietrich in Chapter 4. The international education field has been struggling with this topic for many years. Mitic makes the important point that diversity, equity, and inclusion issues are not limited to the US; Germany and other members of the EU have also suffered from unequal access to education, although it is more by income level and geography than race and ethnicity. One suggestion is that publicly funded exchange programs do even more to target academic institutions with large populations of underserved students, including historically black colleges and universities, community colleges, and other minority-serving institutions. My own experience suggests that the faculty at these institutions have substantial influence on the life choices made by their students; faculty who participate in exchanges may be the key to persuading more of their students to pursue education abroad.

For the exchange of scholars and other professionals (covered in Chapters 1, 2, and 3), the authors do not foresee a radical restructuring of exchanges, despite the rapid increase in virtual communication and collaboration. They all believe that face-to-face interaction is essential for these programs to be effective. Nevertheless, increasing familiarity with an array of educational technologies is an opportunity for our field. Imagine, as an example, a program design where a group of professionals, scholars, and other experts from around the world are assembled to address a pressing global challenge, such as fresh water management and conservation. Imagine also that constraints in personal schedules only allow them to spend one week together face-to-face, with all other collaboration conducted virtually. A number of critical design questions immediately come to mind. First, how do we quickly create a sense of shared commitment and collective responsibility within the group? What does this mean for selection criteria and for the size of the group? At the end of the week, how will we know that we have achieved these affective goals? And how do we maintain and even build on those goals after we move to a virtual environment?

With this example, I am suggesting that merely grafting technology on to existing program design may not work. Much like conventional classroom instruction, our field has seen examples of where conventional modes of delivery have been digitized without asking more fundamental questions about goals and means. We need to start with a clean sheet of paper, with technology as one of several tools for meeting programmatic goals. With convenient travel between the US and the EU, the one-week constraint in my example may be excessive. But in developing countries, I frequently hear that senior campus leaders cannot be away from their campuses for more than a few weeks at a time—and travel time and costs are much more prohibitive.

The virtual environment also opens promising possibilities for joint projects among many countries. In the example of water management cited above, program participants could be selected from countries and institutions using a process that maximizes the value of comparison across national borders. Three categories of countries come to mind: (1) developed countries that have addressed water shortages effectively, although with the expenditure of resources that may not be available to developing countries; (2) developing countries with water shortages that have experienced varied degrees of success in their policies and practices; and (3) developing countries that expect to experience water shortages in the future, including those affected by climate change. Designing learning experiences through national comparison is one of the most important tools for international educators, and it is also one of the most challenging: too much difference between countries means that there is no practical basis for comparison; too little difference means there is no stimulation and diffusion of new ideas and solutions.

International exchanges within professional fields outside of academia, such as law and journalism, are not as well known as academic exchanges. In the United States, we do not have a program for professionals with the wide name recognition of Fulbright, although the Hubert H. Humphrey Fellowship, administered by the U.S. Department of State, is widely admired within our field. My own belief is that professional exchanges are not sufficiently valued for their broader public diplomacy value: an exchange of lawyers may produce better lawyers, one may argue, but perhaps the value ends there. A closer look at legal exchanges will demonstrate that they have advanced the rule of law, addressed corruption, promoted an independent judiciary, investigated war crimes, and advanced human rights in many countries. In business, the International Executive Service Corps has placed thousands of American executives in foreign businesses, all of whom are self-funded volunteers. In the United States, the poor response to COVID-19, the persistent problems of race and equity, and the rise of the political right have caused many to question the viability of our public institutions; the best solutions to our problems may be found in the experience of other countries, and we should frequently remind ourselves that exchanges involve the importing and well as the exporting of knowledge and ideas.

Like Chapter 1, our second chapter is a case study, focusing on exchanges in the field of journalism. I chose this field for two reasons. The first is that it is a rich, well-developed ecosystem, with governments, academic institutions, and the private sector all contributing financial support and professional development experiences. The author, Birgit Rieck, served as associate director at a privately funded fellowship program until 2019. Housed at the University of Michigan, the program hosts 12 domestic and up to eight international journalists annually. The second reason is that journalism has a powerful multiplier effect. Investigative journalism is fundamental to good government and strong public institutions. Subfields like scientific journalism contribute to the development of an informed citizenry and ultimately support democratic institutions. The latter is especially important to the United States and the European Union, where evidence-based arguments (and the experts who make them) are under attack from the political right.

Rieck is a practitioner, and her tone and style are very different from the scholarly approach of Chapter 1. That is intentional. She makes a passionate and convincing argument for unstructured time during the exchange experience, which helps to stimulate creativity and new approaches to problems. She believes that this is especially important in the design of mid-career exchanges, when the participant may be questioning whether they want to continue in their field. Journalism is stressful and exhausting, and in many countries it is dangerous. Her chapter should also stimulate some discussion about the ultimate goals of professional exchanges. For her own program, the professional development of the participants is the key performance indicator. For other programs, such as the International Executive Service Corps, the professional development of the individual is incidental—the main goal is to transform the hosting organization. In other programs, the sending institution expects a return in the form of a more productive employee, which raises important questions about retention. Once again, we are faced with some daunting questions when it comes defining program goals and designing an effective evaluation plan.

Like Mitic, Rieck does not believe that the pandemic will stimulate a fundamental rethinking of the way we design and execute professional exchanges: there are simply too many types of tacit and nuanced learning that are taking place, and as we can see in the paragraph immediately above, they are often moving in several directions at the same time. And who believes you can completely unplug from your work life in a virtual environment?

Chapter 3, co-authored by Laure Haak and Caroline Wagner, focuses on research collaboration across international borders. Like Mitic, Haak and Wagner are serious scholars, with deep expertise as researchers and as advisors to the public agencies that provide research funding in the United States. Here the iceberg metaphor is appropriate: while official exchanges are the most visible and measurable mode of collaboration, they are a small percentage of all international research collaboration. Official exchanges include scientific collaboration that is defined by international treaty, and they include grants from government-funded agencies like the U.S. National Science Foundation. They do not include privately funded exchanges, and they do not include the spontaneous, "bottom up" collaborations that are so prevalent among major research universities. As I am writing this introduction, I am reading year-end summaries about the major accomplishments in a variety of scientific fields during 2020; international collaboration is now the norm in most scientific fields.

The issue of research integrity is beyond the scope of Chapter 3, but in recent years it has emerged as an important issue within the global research community, and especially with regard to China. Research integrity includes rules and norms on peer review, the confidentiality of pre-published work, ownership rights, data-sharing, and authorship on joint projects. Research integrity has never been a major concern in the bilateral relationship between the US and the EU or between the US and Germany. But the actions of the previous US president raise two important policy questions. The first is whether the US and the EU should be working together, perhaps in cooperation with other countries with strong traditions of research integrity, to strengthen global research norms. The attacks on China's research integrity make some valid points, and yet they have come at a time when China is finally coming into its own as a major player in university research. The solution is to work with China, not against it. Given the steep decline in US-China relations over the past four years, which may take years to reverse, a multilateral approach may be the more effective way to engage China on this issue.

The second concern lies in the area of economic competitiveness. We have seen political leaders on both sides of the Atlantic successfully tap into deep reservoirs of economic nationalism. We are naïve if we believe that these sentiments will disappear with a different American president, and we are equally naïve if we believe that the US will never direct its destructive tendencies toward the European Union. From the US perspective, the potential danger is that university research that has historically been defined as fundamental or basic—and therefore publicly accessible to all countries—could be assigned a new category that is intended to protect and promote domestic industries over international competitors.

With Chapters 4 and 5, we make the pivot to student exchanges. Beyond the target audiences, these chapters offer some important contrasts to the first three. For one, efforts to evaluate the impact of student exchanges are more advanced, with numerous studies demonstrating that education abroad contributes to learning, personal development, and career success. Nevertheless, these achievements are still modest, and the authors offer some important recommendations to institutions. Second, the field has made important efforts to develop universal standards for designing and managing student exchange programs. Finally, the field has embraced virtual learning for over a decade, both as a mode for delivering independent courses and as a means to strengthen conventional physical mobility programs. All of the US's major study abroad partners in Europe are now delivering their regular course offerings online, and the authors make the important point that the definition of virtual exchange should also include the practice of allowing international students to enroll directly in these courses.

The authors of Chapter 4 argue that the future of education abroad lies in the hybrid approach, with every travel-based experience strengthened with virtual experiences before, during, and after the travel component. They offer a detailed case study of one US institution that is adopting this approach, and they offer recommendations to other institutions that will help them integrate this approach into existing and future programs. Those of us who have taught at the university level know how challenging it is to retroactively convert conventional courses to an online format. We can expect institutions to increasingly use the hybrid approach when designing new programs, drawing on the strengths of both the physical and virtual world to maximize student learning. Given the rapid expansion of short-term study abroad among US institutions, this approach offers some exciting possibilities for extending and deepening these experiences.

Education abroad in the United States is primarily an undergraduate experience, especially when it comes to experiences that last a full semester or academic year. At the graduate level, students have less time for travel, they are more likely to want to tie the experience to career goals, and a bigger fraction of their curriculum is designated for required courses. For many institutions, especially for graduate-level programs in business and engineering, the solution is experiential learning, where students are assigned a research or consulting project in a foreign country. While travel time may be limited to just a few days, the complete experience can last for several weeks or even a full semester. The host organization is usually involved in the design of the project, and they often have input into student evaluations.

When taken together, Chapters 4 and 5 define what I will call the European paradox: Europe continues to be the destination of choice for US undergraduates, but for US graduate students, other parts of the world are more attractive. For an American undergraduate with limited travel experience and some knowledge of a European language, Europe may be a compelling option. The trend is cyclically reinforcing: large numbers of students mean significant investments in infrastructure, including local staffing and facilities, which in turn increase the attractiveness to participants.

But the graduate experience is very different. Especially at elite US institutions, many students have already spent time in Europe, often as undergraduate exchange students. Especially among graduate business students, there is also a sense that the most interesting opportunities and challenges are in other parts of the world. If I want to learn about the latest trends in electric vehicle technology, for example, I would have a difficult time choosing between a study abroad experience in China or Germany—but I might conclude that I will get to Germany one day on my own. One programmatic solution is to do both countries: perhaps travel to both countries for a shorter period of time, or travel to one country and visit the other virtually, possibly by doing a joint research project with students at a local university. Relying on her own research and interviews, Lisa Miller, the author of Chapter 5, makes some recommendations for improving the attractiveness of Europe, and Germany in particular, for American MBA students.

Every administrator who leads internationalization on their university campus knows that they must tie their programming to broader institutional goals, otherwise their activities will never be seen as central to the mission of the institution. The authors of Chapter 4 offer several examples of how to tie education abroad to more universal learning goals, such as addressing racial injustice or promoting civic engagement. Just as important, they directly address the most important goal for many institutions in the US, which is to improve on the success of historically underserved students. Much has already been written about this topic, but I believe the authors make two critically important contributions to this discussion. First, they argue that the issue is about more than cost: if a student believes that an exchange experience is essential for their career success and personal development, then the cost will be seen as an investment. The second observation is closely tied to the first: education abroad programs must be designed in ways that are much more closely aligned with the career goals of underserved populations. This will not always be possible: I can make a pretty good case for why a marketing major should learn about other cultures and their approaches to selling products, but my mind draws a blank when it comes to accounting.

Finally, we come to the question of how to increase the volume of students moving across the Atlantic. Read together, the final two chapters of this volume suggest a new approach to program design that focuses on global challenges and themes rather than national destinations. Rather than positioning the foreign country as the learning goal, it should be presented as the means toward a deeper understanding of a complex global problem, whether it is water management, electric cars, or renewable energy. This approach would go beyond comparing existing national perspectives and experiences; it would also introduce an analytical framework that would enable students to draw useful comparisons for the rest of the lives. Reinforcing this approach through other parts of the undergraduate curriculum may be essential. While most universities would argue that a liberal arts education should cultivate the ability to learn through comparison across cultures and countries, I have not seen this goal articulated as part of any general education curriculum.

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