

USG International Education Summit

Transforming Undergraduate Education in the  
University System of Georgia: The International Imperative

Remarks of  
President Dorothy Leland  
Georgia College & State University

The Carter Center  
Atlanta, Georgia

October 10, 2007

Good morning.

It is my pleasure to be here today and I thank each of you for participating in this important summit.

No one can deny that our world today creates its own global imperatives and, as a result, international education is emerging from the wings to take a more central spot on the academic stage.

This shift has been propelled by a number of factors—most prominently by globalization, broadly understood as the increasing interdependency and interconnectedness of people around the world and of the world's markets and businesses.

Like it or not, globalization has entered popular consciousness, thanks in part to the amazing impact of Thomas Friedman's best-seller, "The World is Flat." Thousands of people who may or may not have actually read this work know its central thesis—that technology is making the world "flatter" by breaking down geographic and other barriers to information flow, international trade, and international collaboration.

I am convinced that the popularity of Friedman's work is linked not only to the incessant cleverness of its lead metaphor but also to the fact that

so many of us have experienced elements of the flattening he describes—for example, the diminished importance of natural and political geography for a growing number of business and work activities. Today, it is not unlikely that a technician who is sitting in an office in Bangalore will answer a computer support call made from Macon. In the same way, it is not unlikely that the next breakthrough in your favorite business application or instructional software will be a consequence of a 24/7 developmental process involving software engineers from different continents.

Not surprisingly, Friedman’s “world is flat” metaphor has garnered an array of competitors as intellectuals debate the nature of the forces that will drive the global economy and determine its metaphorical topography. The good news is that people are increasingly paying attention to the global forces and trends that will impact our future. And this isn’t limited to business and the economy. For example, we live in a post 9/11 world, acutely aware of how patterns of conflict have shifted from the cold war era. Today we will hear about other global trends, including staggering increases in population growth, sharply increased demands for food, water and energy, and changes in governance that will shape the world and challenge its citizens and leaders.

How well we compete in the global economy—how well we address the world’s pressing social and political problems—indeed how well we and others survive: all this depends on how well we prepare our students to respond to the challenges of our globally interconnected world.

Today, there is a growing consensus among education and corporate leaders that American higher education must ramp up its expectations for student learning. Here is a headline. A recent report released by the Partnerships for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills finds that “most young people entering the workforce lack critical skills essential for success.” Skills singled out by this report include writing, quantitative reasoning, and critical thinking and problem solving. The same report notes the growing importance of understanding other nations and cultures and proficiency in foreign languages for the workforce of the future.

The Association of American Colleges & Universities has echoed these and other findings in a report issued this year, appropriately entitled *College Learning for the New Global Century*. If you haven’t studied this report already, I urge you to do so. It argues--persuasively, I think--for a coordinated effort to ensure that college graduates succeed in reaching higher levels of knowledge and skills in learning outcomes that will prepare them—and hence our nation—to respond to the complex realities of our

world. As described by the report, this is a world that has been “dramatically reshaped by scientific and technological innovations, global interdependence, cross-cultural encounters, and changes in the balance of economic and political power.” The report cites mounting evidence that indicates that our students are underachieving in critical skill and knowledge areas, and it urges us to recognize that student success in college cannot be demonstrated solely in terms of widely used metrics pertaining to enrollment, persistence, and degree attainment. These metrics “miss entirely the question of whether students who have placed their hopes for the future in higher education are actually achieving the kind of learning they need for a complex and volatile world.”

Those of you who are here today representing University System of Georgia institutions have an opportunity to lead efforts to revitalize undergraduate education in ways that will be responsive to such challenges. As you know, this is the first goal of the University System’s recently adopted strategic plan. The objectives associated with this goal are both ambitious and critical for ensuring that our students are well prepared for the demands of work, citizenship and life in the rapidly changing, enormously complex and infinitely challenging world that they will need to navigate and lead.

My piece of the puzzle is the University System's core curriculum framework, which structures most of the first two years of undergraduate education in University System institutions. I have been asked to lead, with your help, a significant restructuring of this framework that will move us away from a set of distribution requirements towards a new focus on essential learning outcomes, effective pedagogies and educational best practices, and standards for student achievement. This effort will be grounded in fundamental questions regarding educational quality in an era in which high expectations for the knowledge and skill levels of our students are being established by "the world itself" (*College Learning for a New Global Century*).

For example, this effort will acknowledge that global interdependence provides the context in which our student will work, live and lead. Hence, we will ask fundamental questions about how we can best prepare our students through the core curriculum to respond to global issues that will challenge us for the foreseeable future. Our answers to these questions will identify the learning outcomes that we expect for globally competent students who graduate from our institutions.

Without prejudging the outcome, I can tell you that prior work from higher education thought leaders will guide our considerations. For

example, the American Council on Education (ACE) has issued a series of working papers on internationalizing higher education in the United States that provides a useful starting point for study and deliberation. In a project sponsored by FIPSE, ACE has even developed a list of learning outcomes that warrant consideration in our own efforts to articulate the knowledge and skill expectations for globally competent students.

Knowledge outcomes recommended by this ACE project (*Building a Strategic Framework for comprehensive internationalization*) include understanding one's own culture within a global and comparative context, understanding global issues, processes, trends and systems, and understanding the beliefs, values, perspectives, practices and products of other cultures. Skill outcomes include being able to use foreign language skills and/or knowledge of other cultures to extend one's access to information, experiences, and understanding. Other skill outcomes include using diverse frames of reference to think critically and solve problems, and being able to communicate and connect with people in other language communities in a range of settings and for a variety of purposes.

These are heady expectations that are nonetheless made more urgent given the realities of our global economy and post 9/11 world.

In seeking to identify what students should know and be able to do in order to meet the challenges of the future, the core curriculum initiative will consider other fundamental questions. For example, we will ask how we can best prepare graduates through the core curriculum for a global economy that demands innovation and the ability to move with ease across disciplinary, cultural, and other boundaries. We will ask a similar question with respect to our nation's scientific and technological leadership, citizenship and civic engagement, ethical decision-making and social responsibility.

I suspect that you may have noticed the question that the core curriculum initiative does *not* ask: It does not ask which disciplines get to be represented in the core curriculum, and this surely will provide occasions for consternation. After all, the current core curriculum consists of distribution requirements linked to essential skills and disciplines. But the fact that the core curriculum initiative does not explicitly focus on disciplinary representation does not mean that disciplinary knowledge is unimportant. To the contrary, disciplinary knowledge is the crystallization of important processes of inquiry and discovery and will enter the core by virtue of its connections to the learning outcomes that we identify as essential for meeting the challenges of the future.

In addition to asking fundamental questions about what student should be expected to know and be able to do through their core curriculum studies, the University System of Georgia core curriculum initiative will identify educational practices that promote student learning with respect to the outcomes we expect them to achieve. For example, the National Science Foundation is supporting a renewed focus on “science as science is done” in both K-12 and undergraduate education. This approach connects key concepts with contested questions and actively involves students in processes of empirical observation, analysis and other forms of guided-inquiry. The *College Learning for the New Global Century* report advocates more broadly for approaches to learning that actively engage students with “the ‘Big Questions’, both contemporary and enduring” and in doing so notes that “all students—including those least prepared—learn best when they can see the point of what they are doing.” This strikes me as a “no brainer,” but in case you are wondering, there is some compelling research evidence to support this contention.

I will conclude this talk with another example, closer to the theme of this summit. International educators have long been aware of the value of study abroad in helping students to achieve certain learning outcomes. Various research projects have demonstrated that students return from study

abroad programs with improved cross-cultural skills and greater “world-mindedness” than those who have not been involved in such programs. Our students confirm this research anecdotally. For example, Michael Rifenburg, a study abroad alumnus from Georgia College, said his time in St. Petersburg Russia “jump-started my undergraduate career. No longer was I simply going to classes and coming home, but I was continually immersed in learning. The value of study abroad is that it allows people to realize that there are other cultures out there – different values – and different ways of looking at the world.”

Perhaps most importantly, students who study abroad demonstrate changed perceptions of the positive versus the negative outcomes of globalization. And almost all report direct impacts on their careers through the increased knowledge they gained, improved inter-cultural skills, and the ability to feel more at ease when working with people from different cultural backgrounds. Unfortunately, less than 10-percent of American college students participate in study abroad programs, according to a report prepared for the Educational Testing Service.

It is unlikely, of course, that we will require study abroad System-wide as a means for helping students to achieve global competencies. For a variety of reasons, this option remains out of reach for some of our students.

But students can be provided with meaningful cultural immersion experiences closer to home, particularly in areas of the state and region that support significant first and second generation immigrant populations. We can also tap into the extraordinary power of technology to connect students across continents in meaningful cultural exchanges.

It is not by accident that I have titled the University System of Georgia Core Curriculum Initiative “Strong Foundations for a Global Future.” The core curriculum purports to provide foundational knowledge and skills, and our task is to ensure that it does its job in light of 21<sup>st</sup> century global realities. This entails a renewed focus on fundamental questions about what students need to know and be able to do and also on the pedagogies and educational best practices that will help our students to succeed.

My hope is that you will lend your leadership, knowledge and talent to this critically important effort. Thank you.

---

