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Brief 12: Global Citizenship: A Role for Higher Education

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NERCHE BRIEF

New England Resource Center for Higher Education
March 2002

The following Brief from the New England Resource Center for Higher Education (NERCHE) is a distillation of the work by members of NERCHE's think tanks and projects from a wide range of institutions. NERCHE Briefs emphasize policy implications and action agendas from the point of view of the people who tackle the most compelling issues in higher education in their daily work lives. With support from the Ford Foundation, NERCHE disseminates these pieces to a targeted audience of higher education leaders and media contacts. The Briefs are designed to add critical information and essential voices to the development of higher education policies and the improvement of practice at colleges and universities.

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Global Citizenship: A Role for Higher Education

Immediately after the events of September 11, the US was stunned by horror and disbelief, angry at the perpetrators of such awful violence, puzzled by the country's inability to recognize itself in the eyes of the world, and eager to learn more about other cultures from which it felt so alien. Our college campuses reflected this range of responses. At their first meetings of the academic year, members of NERCHE's Think Tanks, who represent faculty and administrators in New England, and SAGES (Senior Academics Guiding Educational Strategies), retired presidents and provosts, described their reactions and the range of responses campus.

While many faculty and staff quickly recalled tragic incidents in the not-so-distant past, students often had little direct experience of a national catastrophe on this scale. Their reactions were somewhat mixed and certainly complicated, reflecting in large part the responses of the society around them. After the terrorist attacks, faculty, whose political thinking had been shaped by significant events such as the Vietnam War, found that they were staring across a gap to a generation of students whose attitudes and opinions had been formed in an absence of serious international conflict or national peril.

Among many students there was discussion of patriotism, as they called into question what it meant to be Americans, members of a diverse society, and people who reside in the U.S. but are citizens of other nations. Sometimes tensions were heightened, provoking fears of factionalism among campus leaders. And on several campuses, xenophobia fuelled distrust of those who are different, strange, and foreign. Some

students leapt to conclusions about cultural differences. For those who were not able to be self-reflective, prejudice was not easily kept at bay.

Many students were eager to take some kind of action. They wanted to be part of something and participated in events such as speakers' forums that they had previously not seen as a priority. Before 9-11 many students went about their business as if they were separate from the world around them. Now they demanded more foreign policy and Middle Eastern courses from administrations. At the same time, there lingered an incipient belief that "this too will pass," because experience had taught them to have faith in their government. As soon as several days after the disaster, faculty reported that some of their students wanted to get back to work and to be distracted.

As time has passed, we at NERCHE hear with increasing frequency from faculty and administrators that most students have slipped back into their individual orbits. It can be said that many Americans have slid back into their routines. As all of us try to resume a sense of normalcy in this stressful time, a new attitude threatens to overtake us: Our assertive interest in global events is in danger of being replaced by a more passive media focus on a conflict in a small, impoverished country half a world away. Americans risk living up to the stereotype of a self-absorbed population with an infamously short attention span.

During times of national and international turmoil, colleges and universities are often flashpoints for controversy and conflict. After the recent violence, questions were raised about the appropriate role of faculty and student groups in expressing dissent about US policies. Faculty were accused by the American Council of Trustees and Alumni of being unpatriotic for failing to exhibit American flags, and to marshal their resources to enhance institutional and national security. In times of national peril and uncertainty, however, we must look to faculty in their professional roles to prepare students to analyze data skillfully, think critically, and act as responsible members of their communities, including the global one.

Equally important, we must expect faculty to ask the difficult questions, especially when the tendency in a national debate is to embrace an appealing but unexamined uniformity. Society is best served when faculty are guaranteed academic freedom, even if what is said is disagreeable. The real test of the fundamental principle of free speech, for each of us individually and for all of us as a nation, comes when the views expressed are unpopular and critical.

In recent months, hopes have been high among the national leadership that U.S. citizens would adopt a new spirit of civic engagement represented by a surge in military enlistments and interest in service vocations. While these speculations have not been borne out by evidence, there has been a shift in civic "feelings" in the U.S., according to the results of a recent survey by Harvard University's Robert Putnam. Public awareness has spread, especially among this country's younger generation, and, he argues, national leaders should take advantage of opportunities for civic renewal by asking young citizens to become involved in service initiatives such as Americorps and national service programs. For the past decade, many colleges and universities have made civic engagement central to their missions. Students work in communities in ways that engender deep reflection and the kind of critical inquiry that distinguishes community engagement from volunteerism. Faculty bring their expertise to bear upon local problems. These activities are vital to developing an informed and committed

citizenry, but unless this commitment extends beyond our national borders, these students will be ill equipped to function in the global arena.

Since September 11th, the world has learned how global the Al Qaeda network is. While the student bodies on our campuses may be similarly global in terms of the home nations of our students, the curriculum on most campuses still does not provide adequate learning experiences for our students, faculty, and staff to develop a broad understanding of current international issues and cultures. While a few campuses across the nation are beginning to address this, colleges and universities must recognize the leadership role they can play by assuming the task of educating Americans, young and old, about their global citizenship. Higher education needs to participate in the education of U.S. citizens and students of all nations regarding others' cultures and history, including our own. Increasingly, we are inextricably linked by a global economy. Now it is more urgent than ever before that we collaborate with one another in learning to understand each other.

NERCHE offers the following suggestions for members of the higher education community:

- Employ existing faculty and curricula to educate more Americans in the languages, history, and cultures of the world. Every discipline in our educational institutions can and should take part in such endeavors. Seek coalitions with governments, foundations, and the corporate community in order to provide funding to facilitate this task.
- Build curriculum capacity on the deeper issues underlying the recent crisis: Review faculty expertise in the relevant areas, offer time off for those interested to prepare new courses, help departments and programs move the new courses into the curriculum as quickly as possible, review their placement in general education and concentration requirements.
- Hold faculty seminars with specialists on the hot points of terrorism and anti-U.S. activity, Near East, the Middle East, Islam, U.S. foreign policy, and other salient issues.
- Educate the community in which your institution resides about the issues and their context through discussions, lectures, art exhibits, and other events that aim to broaden the public's view of themselves as citizens of the world. This is the time for the campus to become a focal point of the community---no ivory tower.
- Be vigilant about protecting academic freedom and freedom of speech in order to ensure that all points of view are being heard. Our higher education institutions should be models for critical thinking and analysis for our students and society.

- Encourage faculty, administrators, and students to renew their commitment to community and civic engagement, especially in organizations and activities that foster cross-cultural exposure and understanding.

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