

Global Learning as Liberal Learning for All Majors

► **Jill E. Blondin**, Director, VCU Globe, Global Education Office, Virginia Commonwealth University
Rachel Gable, Assistant Director of Academic Programming, VCU Globe, Global Education Office, Virginia Commonwealth University

The Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) defines global learning as “a critical analysis of and an engagement with complex, interdependent global systems and legacies . . . and their implications for people’s lives and the earth’s sustainability” (2014). Global learning is accomplished by students, staff, and faculty when they explore and consider the diverse perspectives, commitments, and responsibilities they and others promote in our interconnected world. Global learning does not aim to produce like-minded citizens or to foster uniform knowledge outcomes. In fact, global learners will likely disagree, both on norms and facts, but they will have the skills and aptitude to listen deeply, consider the perspectives of others, respectfully tolerate differences of opinion, and work toward meaningful solutions to shared problems.

Given the learning objectives of critical thinking, personal reflection, perspective taking, and complex problem solving associated with a global learning paradigm, it can easily be associated with AAC&U’s suggested goals of liberal education broadly defined. We believe that our approach to global learning outlined below provides the students at our large research university, regardless of their majors and professional goals, with a rigorous form of liberal education that equips them with the capacities and habits of mind to succeed in a wide array of postgraduate pathways. Moreover, we aim to produce graduates who are not only broadly educated but also socially committed, active community members who are prepared to engage with others from diverse backgrounds and points of view. We do this through a living-learning certificate model that incorporates several high-impact practices known to improve learning and graduation outcomes for all students and especially for low-income

students, underrepresented minorities, and first-generation college students (Kuh 2008).

VCU GLOBE: UNDERGRADUATE GLOBAL LEARNING

Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) is a large, urban, public research university that has approached comprehensive internationalization through a series of concerted and multilevel efforts to foster a campus culture that values the presence and perspectives of international students, scholars, and research. As an institution, VCU has done this by supporting global partnerships that bring international students and scholars to campus; fostering integration of international students and scholars into campus units through curricular and cocurricular programming; sending VCU students and faculty into the local community to support multicultural and immigrant populations; and increasing global awareness and intercultural communication among students, staff, and faculty.

As a diverse and expanding urban institution, VCU offers significant resources and opportunities for students and the Richmond community, including the presence of growing numbers of international students on campus and the university’s proximity to communities of recently arrived residents with diverse languages, cultures, and experiences. Access to international populations allows students to learn about the impact of migration and globalization and to have a direct comparative experience in dealing with local issues that have potentially global roots (Stearns 2010).

In early 2013, VCU launched VCU Globe—an interdisciplinary global education living-learning certificate program designed for undergraduate students in all areas of study—which harnesses



the resources of the campus and region to foster intercultural learning through sustained and structured interactions among program participants, international students, and community members. VCU Globe's mission is to provide a global experience locally and to prepare students to become engaged global citizens by developing their intercultural competency, skills, and experiences via curricular and cocurricular activities, including service on campus and in the community.

With no clear parallels at other institutions, VCU developed VCU Globe as an interdisciplinary model for a high-capacity six-semester program that uniquely combines living, learning, and service (Blondin 2015). The program provides undergraduates with a global experience through a six-semester program that combines a twelve-hour curriculum, residential cocurricular programming, and structured activities and service on campus and in communities locally and abroad. Students are recruited from all majors, and the target class size is approximately one hundred, with a total of three hundred members in any given year. Students whose different academic pathways might mean that they would otherwise not find occasion to interact are encouraged to mingle and learn about each other's professional pathways in the context of global learning. Students preparing for careers in the health professions take courses with business majors and liberal arts majors, each learning skills from the other that can be incorporated into their own plans. The global education curriculum draws on examples and case studies from a wide range of disciplines that can be applied to a student's specific area of study, but it also reveals overlaps and parallels from different disciplines that students might not have discovered otherwise. In 2016–17, fifty-nine different majors were represented in the program, with psychology

(9.5 percent), international studies (8.9 percent), and biology (7.5 percent) as the most popular majors of those in the program.

Successful completion of the program's requirements earns students a certificate of completion in global education. Students move through the program in cohorts and live in a residence hall that houses both VCU Globe participants and international students. The interdisciplinary curriculum fosters students' awareness of the skills required of global learners and global



citizens, while the applied dimensions of VCU Globe complement the theoretical concepts examined in courses. All of the VCU Globe courses strongly reflect Kahn and Agnew's assertion that "global learning classrooms provide a form of practiced mimicry, where students incorporate perspectives, overcome challenges, transcend difference, and seek answers collaboratively" (2017, 58).

Faculty members also encourage study abroad as an optimal form of experiential learning, and to this end they have created and led program-specific courses abroad in Botswana, Japan, Mexico, Greece, and Qatar. Finally, VCU Globe has partnered

with the Peace Corps to offer a Peace Corps Prep certificate to all students who graduate with two years of a world language in addition to our program requirements. The Peace Corps Prep program provides a value-added opportunity that enhances the students' experiences and preparation. This extra certification assists our students who plan to work and live abroad after graduation and rewards their extended engagement with a world language.

HIGH-IMPACT PRACTICES SUPPORT BOTH ACCESS AND EXCELLENCE

While we believe that global learning and global citizenship are important skills for twenty-first-century graduates, VCU Globe also offers a supportive and growth-focused community for our students' professional and academic goals beyond global citizenship. As mentioned above, we recruit students from all majors and with a range of professional goals, but we also recruit students with a range of academic preparation. Some of our members need additional academic support, which our faculty and staff provide through supportive advising and liaising with disciplinary advisors. Some of our members need help with the social transition to college. Again, we provide this through our active mentorship, open-door advising policy, and proactive community development in the residence halls and classes. The rewards for these efforts are clearly seen in higher GPAs, as our members' GPA average is 3.16, compared to 2.87 for the university. Additional rewards include a stronger network for our students, a broader sense of postgraduate possibilities, and an engaging college experience. Beyond the content of global issues and the critical skillset of global learners, our students acquire cultural mindfulness and social skills crucial for success in a complex world. Our

members point to their increased empathy, speaking and listening skills, observational habits, and “culture brokering” practice as chief translatable skills that help them in job interviews and with their coursework outside the program. Already, VCU Globe students have begun reaping the fruit of these labors. Among the first two years of graduates, there are three Fulbright scholars, four Peace Corps volunteers, three AmeriCorps volunteers, and two Teach for America corps members. Many of our recent graduates are already employed in a field of their interest or are planning to attend graduate school. When they return to campus, they often go out of their way to tell us that VCU Globe helped set them on their vocational paths.

What makes this program special? For one, our living-learning community creates a small-college feel, complete with available faculty and high levels of pro-academic peer interaction, within the larger research university context. Our students benefit from the many opportunities that a large research university offers while not losing the personal attention one may expect from a liberal arts and sciences paradigm. Our students have come to expect mentoring from their VCU Globe faculty, but they also are expected to mentor international students and scholars as they learn spoken English and acclimate to the United States. Being a mentor and friend to international students is routinely raised as our members’ most valued aspect of VCU Globe, as it is both personally transformative and supports the immediate application of course theories related to culture, intercultural communication, and global relations. Formal and informal interaction is purposefully high, from movie nights and cooking demonstrations and interactive workshops to impromptu residence hall dinner parties that evolve from knocking on a door and sharing an ingredient. Students cultivate relationships that last beyond a semester or academic

year. VCU Globe students speak of visiting their international student friends during summer vacations and while on study abroad—this in the context of students who often had never considered traveling overseas.

In end-of-term evaluations, our students describe VCU Globe as “embodying” diversity and offering many opportunities that they would not otherwise have. Our advanced students also emphasize how VCU Globe makes them stand out from other job candidates and has helped them to become globally minded citizens. Common themes in student reflections include that students perceive themselves becoming more open-minded and understanding of their identity and of cultural differences—even when they disagree with other students—as a direct result of their participation in our program. They are able to interact with nonnative English speakers from around the world and form meaningful and long-lasting friendships. As one student commented, “As a Globe student, I have had countless opportunities which [have] diversified my academics, pushed me out of my social comfort zone, and challenged my mind, which has led me to become a more independent, brave, and culturally competent person.” Students believe that because of their involvement in the program, they not only learn about different people and contexts, but they grow and change because of ongoing interaction and reflection with people from very different backgrounds. One recent graduate reflected, “It was a program that opened my eyes to a world I otherwise would not have seen. I originally joined the program to learn more about other cultures and meet new people, not thinking it would change my attitudes or views on the world. However, I was very wrong.” As this student and many others attest, VCU Globe is eye opening and

life changing, and it provides a sense of belonging and a safe space where every voice is heard.

CONCLUSION

VCU Globe provides an immersive, interdisciplinary intercultural environment that promotes common institutional goals such as increasing the educational benefits of diversity, promoting inclusion and belonging among all stakeholders, and increasing global awareness among graduates. Students participating in VCU Globe discover new ways of conceiving of their communities, their careers, and themselves, all broadened by the inclusion of a global perspective. VCU Globe is both replicable and innovative as a high-capacity program. It was one of the first programs to employ a credit-bearing curricular platform for students to provide support to incoming international students, as well as one of a few programs that have organized their curricula around specific global learning objectives through which students engage in mutually beneficial interactions with peers from other cultures while documenting their learning. We hope other universities will consider adopting similar models, as their missions and organizational structures allow. ■

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