Report on University of Alabama Birmingham Participation in the ACE Internationalization Laboratory
By the American Council on Education Peer Review Visit Team
April 5-7, 2015

I. Introduction

This report is based on a visit to University of Alabama Birmingham (UAB) by an American Council on Education (ACE) peer review team on April 5-7, 2015. This report also draws upon a document, which the university provided to the peer review team in advance of the visit: UAB Global—A Report for ACE Internationalization Laboratory, March 15, 2015. The team also consulted UAB’s web site.

The visit included meetings with President Ray Watt, Provost Linda Lucas, the Deans (Cindy Selleck- Associate Dean, School of Nursing; Deborah Voltz – Dean, School of Education; Eric Jack – Dean, School of Business; Harold Jones – Dean, School of Health Professions; Iwan Alexander – Dean, School of Engineering; Jeff Engler – Interim Dean, Graduate School; John Meador – Dean, UAB Libraries; Kelly Nichols – Dean, School of Optometry; Max Michael – Dean, School of Public Health; Michael Reddy – Dean, School of Dentistry; Robert Palazzo – Dean, College of Arts and Sciences; Selwyn Vickers – Dean, School of Medicine; and Shannon Blanton – Dean, Honors College), the Global Citizenship Steering Committee (Suzanne Austin, Office of the Provost; Craig Wilson, Sparkman Center; Shannon Blanton, Honors College; Henna Budhwani, Sparkman Center; Josh Carter, Office of President; Leandra Celaya, Health Professions; Nicolass Geurs, Dentistry; Karen Kennedy, Business; Renato Coretta, Arts and Sciences; Grace Jepkemboi, Education; Michael Saag, Medicine; Penny Whiteside, Office of Sponsored International Programs, Sparkman; Hughes Evans, Medicine; Marcela Frazier, Optometry; Abi Yildirim, Engineering; Lisa Schwiebert, Graduate School; Lynda Wilson , Nursing; and Pat Speck, Nursing), and the Global Citizenship Coordinating Committee (Suzanne Austin, Office of the Provost; Henna Budhwani, Sparkman Center; Ashley Floyd, National Fellowships and Scholarships; Craig Wilson, Sparkman Center; Elizabeth Vaughan, Service Learning; Gregg Janowski, VPSFS; Penny Whiteside, Office of Sponsored International Programs; Philip Perkins, International Recruitment & Retention; Tracy Lyons, VPSFS; Melissa Hawkins, ELI; Daniel Chavez-Yenter, Sparkman Center; Tomader Ali, Undergraduate Research; Amy Badham, Sparkman Center; Josh Carter, Office of the President; Brian Johnson, Study Away; Christopher Jones, Student Life; and Julie Price, Facilities Management).
The visit is part of the ACE Internationalization Laboratory (Lab), a project that builds upon the learning from several earlier ACE multi-campus initiatives, including Promising Practices in International Education, Global Learning for All, and the previous cohorts of the Lab itself. In addition to UAB, other institutions participating in the 2013–2015 Laboratory are California State University, Dominguez Hills; Clemson University (SC); Emerson College (MA); Hawai‘i, Leeward, and Windward Community Colleges (HI); Lewis University (IL); Orange Coast College (CA); Sacred Heart University (CT); The State University of New York College at Geneseo; University of Massachusetts Amherst; and Western Washington University.

This confidential report to UAB is designed to assist the institution with its comprehensive internationalization efforts. In spite of the ample reading material provided to the peer review team, we want to emphasize that this report can only be a snapshot of the university, not a full portrait, because the peer review lasted only 24 hours over 2 days and UAB is an intrinsically complex and decentralized institution. Nonetheless, we encourage wide internal distribution of the report so that it can assist the university community in these tasks. The contents will not be published or made public unless the institution chooses to do so or gives ACE permission to do so.

II. Peer Review Team

David Fleshler, Associate Provost for International Affairs, Case Western Reserve University, OH.

Barbara Hill, Senior Associate for Internationalization and Director of the Internationalization Laboratory, Center for Internationalization and Global Engagement, American Council on Education, Washington, DC (team leader).

Dr. Gil Latz, Associate Vice Chancellor for International Affairs | Professor of Geography and Philanthropy, Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis, and Associate Vice President for International Affairs, Office of the Vice President for International Affairs, Indiana University.

III. Overall Strengths

Senior Administration Team

By joining the 11th cohort of ACE’s Internationalization Laboratory, UAB has received strong support from the president, provost, and the deans for comprehensive internationalization—a fact widely acknowledged and appreciated on campus. Because UAB operates in a complicated institutional environment, this wide range of senior support is critical to the task of implementing the university’s emerging global vision.
The Design of the Comprehensive Internationalization Process

The campus-wide steering committee was designed with a diversity of membership across the schools to ensure broad faculty and administrative buy-in, and the group has produced strong recommendations with clear, focused goals. A side benefit of the process was that committee members from different schools learned more about each other. During the peer review visit, the scheduled meetings involved a wide spectrum of the campus community, including high-level academic officers and representatives of important administrative offices. The conversations we had during the visit suggested that internationalization has strong buy-in on campus, but conversations about why internationalization is important must continue. They can shape everything the university does, and clearly a committed core of faculty and staff members are willing to work to achieve that vision.

Quality of Report

UAB Global report is comprehensive and data-rich and well presented, with clear prose, a good reliance on the literature on internationalization, attractive charts, and excellent analysis of strengths, weaknesses, and barriers. The recommendations are reasonable and provide appropriate steps for the university poised to move ahead with comprehensive internationalization. UAB’s impressive strengths in the area of international activity came into focus in the review process, and that data is well presented on the university’s web site. That “global” is hot-linked on the home page gives appropriate prominence to UAB’s commitment to comprehensive internationalization. Clearly, some thought has been given to how the data can be up-dated, as evident from the web site. Perhaps this can be augmented by structuring year-end reports from faculty and deans to make further updating possible.

Strong Brand Identity

We especially like the UAB tag line, Knowledge That Will Change Your World, prominently displayed on the web site, because it has very good resonance with the comprehensive internationalization strategic direction.

Economic Development and Community Engagement

As a publicly funded institution, UAB is deeply committed to the economic development of the state and is deeply engaged in the Birmingham community, which is a key city in the state. Comprehensive internationalization has great potential for contributing to the university’s success here.

Partnerships and Global Production of Knowledge

UAB has many partnerships across the schools, some at the level of individual faculty research, some more broadly conceived. Keeping track of them is a challenge, but worth the effort, as some can be broadened and deepened. This significant level of international activity is a strong base for future developments.
IV. Observations and Recommendations

Paths Forward

This is a very exciting time for UAB, as the university is in a strong position to broaden and deepen its internationalization efforts. The institution already has high levels of international activity, and this is a good foundation on which to build. Internationalization has received strong and engaged support from the president, provost, other senior administrators and members of the faculty—a fact widely acknowledged and appreciated on campus. This support is critical to the task of implementing the university’s global vision.

Leadership and Infrastructure

UAB should capitalize on the interest and momentum toward internationalization that was generated by participation in the Internationalization Laboratory and the Global Citizen work done prior to the Lab by moving immediately to create an Office of Global Engagement (AP). Such a move will begin the process of coordinating the many international activities and initiatives that are currently disconnected. A university of the stature of UAB also needs to have a Senior International Officer (SIO) to enable the university to achieve its international potential.

Such a position is helpful both within the university community for clarity about authority and responsibility, as well as with international partners who are quite sensitive to nuances of position titles. We suggest that without the establishment of such a position, it is unlikely that UAB will be able to achieve many of its key internationalization objectives.

The biggest challenge of organization for UAB, as for any large research institution, is whether it can fashion a campus culture and climate of responsibility throughout the institution to contribute to the global agenda. Organization and administrative mechanisms to support coordination play important roles, particularly in catalyzing a wider dialogue to discuss the delegation of responsibilities across the colleges, departments, faculty governance, and support offices. A more comprehensive look at roles and responsibilities throughout the institution will help settle potential unease over issues of centralization versus decentralization, and provide a more integrated support base for internationalization.

With that said, we suggest that the senior administration clarify the responsibilities and authority of all positions relating to internationalization and implement direct reporting lines for these positions to the provost. ACE has materials that can help clarify the administrative structures needed to support comprehensive internationalization.

A Continuing Internationalization Council

Most Lab institutions find it a good idea to establish an internal standing committee to provide oversight of the implementation plan and advising the senior international officer about policies and practices. Such a group must suit the shared governance structure of the university.
Some institutions also like to have an external advisory board comprised of local corporations, foundations, and heritage groups to give support for the international programs, but this should not be attempted until there is some success with implementation of the recommendations in the report.

International Student Recruitment and Retention

If the university wants to increase the number of degree-seeking international students as one of its internationalization strategies, to do this successfully requires a clear and well-articulated international student enrollment management plan, some features of which are in the report. We agree that a plan specifies the countries and regions from which international students will be recruited and how they will be engaged in the classroom and integrated into the community so that they persevere to degree completion. We recognize that the university knows it is wise to recruit from a variety of countries and regions because no U.S. institution of higher education can influence or control the politics of other countries and reliance on only one or two countries is unhealthy given the volatility of international relations.

Because of these factors, we think that a robust enrollment management plan should have the following features. First, it needs to set intentional numerical goals for both domestic and international students. Second, it needs to address issues of the quality of entering students, ensuring that there is equal attention to this issue for both domestic and international students. Third, it needs to address the diversity of both domestic and international students and to be intentional about ensuring that diversity. Fourth, and equally important, steps must be taken to ensure that international students be distributed widely across the schools so there is no disproportionate impact on any one of them. Fifth, the university must develop sufficient staffing to provide the support that international students need in order to be academically successful.

International Alumni

UAB should give considerable thought to how international alumni can be engaged to further the university’s internationalization. If UAB considers international students as potential; alums from the minute they matriculate, the university should develop a process for tracking them. Alums are valuable to institutions for recruitment, the development of exchange programs, providing international internships, and potentially for funding. As a first step, the university should get names of recent graduates and hire a graduate assistant to search for the international graduates on the Internet as professionals are relatively easy to track. This can form the basis for building a more comprehensive data base. Alums from moment they matriculate.
Curriculum and Learning Outcomes

Because cultural competency has been articulated as UAB’s global learning goal, Internationalization of the curriculum becomes a necessary part of comprehensive internationalization. Because not all students will be able to study abroad, the university must consider ways to internationalize at home. We recommend that UAB begin the process of internationalizing the curriculum and pedagogy as soon as possible. This is a long-term process, involving a discussion of the desired student learning, creating opportunities in all programs for students to acquire and demonstrate this learning, and integrating student study abroad experiences, when they are possible, into the curriculum (both prior to departure and once the students return).

The chief resource needed to accomplish this is the faculty, both the ones currently at the institution and those who will be hired in the future. They need to be incentivized to do this work. Internationalization cannot be accidental—it must be intentional. Advertisements of new positions can emphasize that international experience or background is preferred so that the institution can augment its internationalization. Professional development at various levels will be necessary to help faculty members, department chairs, and deans identify international and/or intercultural learning outcomes, enhance the international/intercultural content of current programs and perhaps create study abroad opportunities that will give global perspectives to the majors. This is not new work, but a means to give the faculty new ways to think about their current teaching and research in a more nuanced way. As the university’s international agenda continues to develop and incorporate graduate education as well as faculty research, the possibilities for productive linkages between undergraduate and graduate training as well as research should be enhanced as much as possible.

Internationalizing the curriculum is not just a responsibility of the language departments and the humanities; a global dimension can be infused in all courses, general education requirements, and majors and minors, and some programs at the university already do this. Given the nature of UAB, the STEM disciplines and the health sciences need to be on board in the curriculum discussions. It is helpful to have scientists talking to scientists about the value of internationalization.

All disciplines need to understand the major in terms of local, national, and global dimensions. A good example is the University of Rhode Island’s classic engineering abroad program. Encouraging interdisciplinary, cross-disciplinary as well as cross-unit collaboration in curriculum development will be especially important in a university such as UAB with its very strong constituent schools and units. Many resources are available to assist the faculty in internationalizing the curriculum. ACE has posted or published successful programs from several projects: “Where Faculty Live”—disciplinary associations (American Political Science Association, American Psychological Association, American Historical Association, and the Association of American Geographers) describing what an internationalized major would look like in their discipline.
In addition, other curricular resources are available at _____________________, which is a collaboration of 12 higher education associations dealing with internationalization. Some of the curricular postings include: Campus-Based Curricular Development (AAC&U)—links to 10 award-winning institutional projects; Global Citizenship (AAC&U)—internationalizing undergraduate majors at 11 institutions; Integrating Global Learning in Science Courses (AAC&U); and Internationalization of Teacher Education (NAFSA)—three case studies. Another potential resource is Global Learning for the 21st Century (the LEAP Report from AAC&U). Also, the university should intentionally expand its culture of faculty development grants to include internationalization of the curriculum.

Internationalizing the Co-curriculum

This follows from internationalizing the curriculum. UAB can create an array of student organizations that provides opportunities for domestic and international students to engage with each other. We recommend that the Senior International Officer and the student affairs officers work together to continue to develop the co-curriculum that can support the work of the academic curriculum.

Memoranda of Understanding

While UAB has a process for developing such documents, we sense that there was interest in improving this process and clarifying roles, especially about issues of fiduciary risk. This is especially important as UAB might want to differentiate between school partnerships and ones, like those at IUPUI, that are defined as all-university strategic partnerships. These require a minimum of three schools participating. ACE has posted some material that could give assistance in this review. Attention should also be given to assessing the sustainability of partnerships through a program of limiting their duration, to allow for review of effective, etc.

Communication and Celebration

We found that UAB has much to celebrate, though our visit revealed that most people have little or no idea about the range of international activity. More attention should be paid to getting that information prominently displayed, as the web site “global” page starts to do. But web sites are rather passive tools—one has to be prompted to go to them. Perhaps more visible celebrations, through a well-thought-out communication plan, are needed.

V. Conclusion

UAB is clearly fortunate to have strong support for internationalization from many faculty and administrators. Of course, conversations about internationalization must continue, in order to widen this base of support so that the university can effectively achieve its vision and mission in terms of internationalization and to prepare its students to be leaders in a global world. UAB has made remarkable progress over the course of its participation in the ACE
Internationalization Lab on developing a set of recommendations for supporting internationalization. We welcome visits to IUPUI and Case Western Reserve to continue to assist the university in its efforts.

UAB is well positioned to continue its work in internationalization because it has all the key ingredients: leadership, energy, and a sense of direction. Internationalization is a long-term project that requires commitment from the top administrators who regularly provide reasons why the campus and its programs (like all of higher education) must become more fully internationalized. This requires adequate resources, accountability, and regular evaluation and assessment. By developing and continuing an intentional process, UAB will make balanced internationalization goals part of its everyday operations, continuing to reinforce its status as a distinguished and distinctive institution.

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