

Global Liberal Arts Alliance Meeting of Presidents, Washington DC April 1-3, 2009

A meeting of presidents from 11 liberal arts colleges in the United States and 11 American-style institutions of higher education in the Middle East, Europe, and north and west Africa took place in Washington D.C. April 1-3, 2009. The meeting was a second gathering of presidents from both sides of the Atlantic to consider the prospect of a Global Liberal Arts Alliance. This Alliance is designed to develop a set of relationships among smaller, independent higher education institutions that educate in the tradition of the liberal arts and sciences – an education of a quality and character that fosters a breadth of knowledge, the habit of continual learning, and a mode of inquiry and analysis that prepares graduates to lead productive lives, adapt to changes in knowledge and work, and contribute to the vitality of the society of which they are part.

An earlier meeting of presidents had convened at Oxford University in 2007 to explore the feasibility of such an alliance among smaller, independent institutions offering degree programs in the mode of American-style liberal arts colleges. The purpose of this follow-up meeting in Washington was, with a larger number of participants, to outline in further detail the nature of such an alliance, to identify common elements as well as differences among institutions in different nations and cultures, and to identify a first set of actions that the Global Liberal Arts Alliance might take. The Global Liberal Arts Alliance is being developed with funding from the Christian A. Johnson Endeavor Foundation and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation (a list of the participating presidents and their institutions appears as Appendix A).

Understanding Different National, Cultural, Social Approaches

Rick Detweiler, President of the Great Lakes Colleges Association, began the session by describing a sequence of experiences that led to the idea of building systematic relationships between a cluster of liberal arts colleges in the U.S. and liberal arts-oriented higher education institutions in other nations. His engagement with colleges in Europe, the Middle East, and Asia during the past dozen years developed a recognition that, while the historical and cultural contexts of these institutions differed in many ways, collectively they offered a perspective on American liberal arts education resembling what Alex de Tocqueville experienced as a European observer of the fledgling American democracy in the 1830s. In the U.S. liberal arts colleges for the most part were founded in the nineteenth century and have deep institutional experience and memory to serve as bearings for their continued progress. But this long history has also resulted in the accumulation, over a century or two, of many hard-to-change habits and programs that are tangential to their core purpose. The counterparts to these colleges in other nations for the most part have a shorter history; while this circumstance and a small alumni base affect their ability to raise funds, these liberal arts institutions abroad are in many respects more agile, capable of innovation and change, and better able to focus on the core of their educational mission.

Regardless of their age or the ways in which they have adapted to unique historical, social, and cultural contexts, all of these institutions experience the same essential challenges in

providing a kind of education that offers both breadth and depth of learning, and that fosters critical thinking and independent expression. Outside of the U.S. the prevailing tradition is for higher education to be technical and specialized in nature, while many in the U.S. have come to value professional education over liberal arts study from the misguided belief that job prospects are better for specialists. Given these common educational values and common challenges among smaller institutions in different nations, the idea of building a set of relationships to foster the exchange of knowledge, experience, and perspective among these institutions became increasingly compelling.

Individual colleges frequently seek to develop bilateral relationships with partner institutions overseas to foster exchange of cultural understanding and experience. Too often, however, the needs of one small college do not align well with the strengths the other has to offer. For this reason, a core element of the Global Liberal Arts Alliance is the principle of multilateral relationships. Rather than expect a perfect match between the strengths of one institution and the needs of another, an Alliance of this kind can pool the experience, the academic strengths, the cultural insight and understanding of many institutions, greatly expanding the prospective resources on which any participating institution might draw.

Other principles Rick Detweiler outlined as central to the Global Liberal Arts Alliance included:

- *Reciprocal interaction and benefit.* The premise of a Global Alliance cannot be that U.S. colleges possess experience or expertise beyond that of colleges in other nations. No institution of the Alliance should adopt an “I” orientation that assumes all interactions will be one-way transmissions of its own information and expertise. Each institution must bring an orientation that seeks a reciprocal benefit – both conferring assistance and receiving it from others.
- *Presidential leadership and engagement in institutional relationships.* Though the first-order beneficiaries of Global Alliance engagements will likely be faculty and administrators, the success of the Alliance will depend on the commitment and advocacy of presidents of each participating institution.
- *Focus on interaction and exchange among faculty and administrators in the first instance.* In establishing foundations of the Global Alliance, the most important linkages to be established are among faculty and administrators of participating institutions. These kinds of relationships could in time form the basis of other arrangements, including study abroad opportunities for students. Because students graduate and move on from their institutions, however, the first lines of interaction within the Alliance must be among the faculty and administrators who constitute a more sustaining presence in their home institutions.

Introduction of Participating Institutions: Common Themes

Over breakfast each president was asked to describe characteristics that his or her institution has in common with others of the Alliance, and to identify qualities that make it unique. After breakfast the group convened at the Library of Congress, where each president

offered a short introduction of his or her institution. Through the course of these portraits a number of recurrent themes emerged – questions or dilemmas that multiple institutions confront and which the actions of a Global Liberal Arts Alliance might help colleges to address. Among these common themes:

- The question of what liberal arts education connotes in a particular national, regional, or cultural setting; what mix should be sought between a traditional arts and sciences curriculum and the more applied fields of study.
- What relationship a college or university should establish with the extended community of which it is part – the kinds of contributions it seeks to make to its locality, region, and nation.
- The challenge of fostering meaningful interaction and understanding among students of different cultures, religions, ethnicities, and nationalities.
- The challenge of achieving a balance among in-depth knowledge in a particular field of study, educational breadth, and fostering skills of learning to prepare graduates for a life of continued learning and development.
- The question of what the size and composition of an academic community should be; maintaining core values and identity during a period of rapid growth in the size of the faculty and student body, or during a period of budgetary reduction.
- The challenge of operating in an educational landscape consisting predominantly of government-supported public universities and colleges, in which there is not a full understanding of liberal arts education or of the value it confers to individual students or society in general.
- The challenge of encouraging faculty members to adopt pedagogies that are conducive to the kinds of inquiry and learning that liberal arts institutions seek to instill in students – in some cases, by departing from a structure of lecture and recitation and exploring methods that engage students in formulating their own understanding of course content in ways that strengthen individual thought and enhance learning quality.
- The challenge of creating meaningful links between the academic knowledge students gain from a college curriculum and the experiential learning students gain from study abroad or service projects.
- The challenge of attracting financial resources that provide vital support to an institution in fulfillment of its mission – including resources that make it possible for students of limited financial means to enroll and persist to a degree.
- The dilemma of providing opportunities for professional development to faculty members, given the pressure such opportunities create in terms of leave replacement and course coverage.
- The challenge of institutional governance, finding an appropriate means by which an academic community reaches decisions in the context of its institutional, religious, or national culture.
- The challenge of gaining and sustaining external validation through formal accreditation or recognition – often from an agency whose panel of reviewers are from nations and cultures that differ from that of the home institution.
- The question of what measures institutions of this kind should apply in gauging their success – including such metrics as the number of students from other

nations that enroll, number of students that study abroad, number that earn Ph.D.s, number who enter lives of service, level of financial giving to the institution.

- The challenge of defining what expectations an institution establishes of its faculty in terms of teaching, research, and service, and the impact of these expectations in the allocation of faculty time and energy.

Independence

A theme that participants voiced in a variety of contexts was what it means for an institution of higher education to be “independent.” It was observed during the presidential introductions that some of these universities and colleges represent a large proportion of the private institutions in nations where private higher education constitutes a small percentage of the whole. In governance and funding, each institution seeks in some way to maintain a sense of separation – from its national government or in some cases from its founding religious organization. At the same time, discussion of this subject indicated that it is difficult to consider any of these institutions as entirely separate from the national, cultural, and religious environments in which they operate. An institution may be private, not-for-profit but not entirely independent of its founding society or organization. Even though “independence” is a strong value in the U.S., no private college or university whose students receive federal financial aid can consider itself independent of the workings or regulations of government. Religion also exerts an influence in the curriculum and modes of teaching, expression, and behavior in some institutions.

While no institution can be entirely independent from the influence of its nation and culture, the presidents’ discussion indicated that each institution shares a common purpose of fostering a capacity for independent thought, judgment, and expression in its graduates – providing graduates with education and skills that allow them to lead fulfilling lives and contribute to the vitality of the society they inhabit. Each institution encounters challenges of different kinds in seeking to provide this kind of education. The common goal of educating students for lives of independent thought and learning unites these institutions, providing a strong common bond that can allow them to become important sources of strength and mutual support through the Global Alliance.

An International Resource for Information and Scholarship

Following lunch, participants in the Global Alliance were introduced to officers of the U.S. Library of Congress. Deanna Marcum, Associate Librarian for Library Services, (the most senior non-political officer of the Library), welcomed the presidents of these institutions and described her goal of making the resources of the Library more broadly available to scholars and users throughout the nation and the world. The Library of Congress is the largest library in the world; its central building, she said, is a tribute to the power of democracy and to the freedom of thought and expression, which makes possible an informed and deliberative mode of self-government. Marcum introduced her colleague, Carolyn Brown, who is Director of the Library’s Office of Scholarly Programs and of its John W. Kluge Center. Brown described the Kluge

Center's Scholar's Council, which seeks nominations for fellowships twice yearly; one category of fellowship is for scholars in earlier stages of their career, while another is for more senior scholars. She encouraged presidents to make their faculty aware of the fellowship programs the Library of Congress offers through its Kluge Center. Finally, John Van Oudenaren, senior advisor for the World Digital Library (WDL) project, provided a preview of the digital project the Library of Congress is developing in conjunction with half-dozen other partners around the world. The purpose of this undertaking is to make a growing share of library resources, and primary materials from around the world, available online to users everywhere. The site being created offers information in seven languages, and the meta-data that accompanies any item in the digital resource provides a user with links to other entries in that category. The Library's ambitious digital project offers a resource to scholars throughout the world; in both its fellowship programs and its digital outreach, the Library can make important contributions to the vitality of the institutions participating in the Global Liberal Arts Alliance. (Rick Detweiler has subsequently conveyed in a letter to Deanna Marcum some questions and prospects the Global Alliance participants identified concerning the Library's resources; his letter appears as Appendix B.)

Differing Conceptions of the Liberal Arts

Friday morning's discussion centered on the different conceptions of the liberal arts in the context of particular nations and cultures. It was observed that the idea of preparing students for lives of productive engagement as citizens has not been central to the European tradition, where professional specialization is the norm. In many nations today, including increasingly in the U.S., the primary focus of higher education is to provide graduates with market skills that contribute directly to economic vitality and short term personal financial success. Often there is less emphasis on the development of critical thought and independent judgment than on memorization and mastery of factual content. The education systems in most of the nations represented tend not to emphasize writing and thinking as key elements of higher education. Anecdotes from presidents in several nations recounted the pressures they receive from constituencies to provide graduates with practical skills that have immediate relevance to current workforce needs. The tenor of discussion suggested that liberal arts education seeks to instill modes of critical thinking as well as a capacity to empathize with others – habits of mind as well as heart – educating graduates to be citizens not just of their own nation but also of the world. This is a message that must be conveyed repeatedly to the constituencies these institutions seek to serve.

Part of the presidents' discussion centered on the challenge of encouraging their own faculty members to adopt a style of teaching that seeks to engage students in active learning, as opposed to conceiving students as passive recipients of knowledge. Professors who have themselves been trained in environments that emphasize straight lecture often find it difficult to adopt more interactive modes of pedagogy.

Another theme of this discussion was that some of the language used to describe the value of liberal arts education in the U.S. carries different meanings in eastern European nations that have lived under a Communist regime. Such terms as or "citizenship," "leader," or "values" carry negative connotations for those who experienced a totalitarian form of government; these were terms that the ruling party often invoked to elicit compliance and conformity in a

population. Government appeals to good citizenship were commonly understood as indications of a willingness to seek out and punish those whose behavior was not in accord with prevailing ideology. For this reason, institutions seeking to foster key educational goals of the liberal arts in a post-Communist setting may need different language to convey their vision of an education that prepares graduates for critical thought and positive engagement with one's own country and culture.

Finally, the discussion indicated that religion and spirituality may also become factors in the teaching and learning environment of some institutions. One participant spoke of the need to instill in students an understanding of the difference between religious belief and a response to culture and traditions that may have been developed on the basis of religion. It is possible to distinguish religious belief itself from a critical examination of religious customs that come about in a cultural context. Another participant noted that his institution, founded by a religious organization, was overtly non-religious in its student body, faculty, administration, or curriculum – the underlying religious value was simply the belief that higher education contributes to human development.

The development of a critical mind; instilling a capacity for empathy with others; the development of moral judgment; the sharpening of oral and written communication skills; the fostering of international and intercultural understanding, in part through the study of other languages; combining academic knowledge with experiential education in new and unfamiliar settings – these were some of the qualities that participants in the session identified as integral to the kind of education their institutions seek to provide. Finally, and very importantly, it is clear that every one of these institutions share a commitment to a pedagogy in which students are closely connected with faculty – where the opportunities for intellectual and even personal engagement are paramount. In the most general sense, the Global Liberal Arts Alliance was thought to have significant potential in helping each participating institution to strengthen these qualities in its own learning environment.

On Being Globally Educated

Closely related to this discussion was another that occurred toward the end of the meeting, focusing on what it means to be globally educated. This latter discussion had the effect of placing liberal arts study in a context beyond that of any single nation, and of evoking the broader multicultural environment for which an education of this kind seeks to prepare its graduates.

To be globally educated, it was suggested, is to be at home in the world – to be comfortable and conversant in a variety of settings, capable of regarding oneself as part of a whole rather than as necessarily front and center of every engagement. It is to be aware of one's own identity in a comparative perspective, to see one's own traditions and modes of thought in the context of others that have equal value and power. Honoring identity, celebrating differences, having the ability to achieve a meaningful common ground with others through negotiation are also characteristics of the globally educated.

The conversation included considerations of what actions a college or university takes to produce globally educated students. Many affirmed the central role of language learning in

acquiring a broadened understanding of culture. While English is the language of international activity and the language of instruction at all participating institutions of the Global Alliance, it is important that students understand the educational benefit that may result from developing bilingual or multilingual ability. Language learning can provide students with another way of thinking about culture and is a central means of feeling at home with a culture other than one's own.

Closely related to the benefit of language learning is the value of an immersion experience in another culture. The ability to participate, for a sustained period, in an environment in which the customs and language differ from one's native setting confers significant value in helping students gain perspective on their own identity in relation to those from other backgrounds.

Opportunities for Interaction

Toward the end of the morning the presidents began to consider actions that the Global Liberal Arts Alliance might take to help participating institutions strengthen their ability to fulfill their educational mission in their respective settings. Each president had been given a homework assignment the night before to identify both opportunities and interests his or her institution might bring to this Alliance. "Opportunities" describe particular strengths or elements of the setting that an institution could bring to the table, and from which other colleges of the Alliance could benefit. "Interests" describe the areas in which one college could benefit from the experience or capacities of another participating institution. Appendix C includes a compilation of Opportunities and Interests submitted by the president of each institution participating in the Global Alliance.

Reflecting on a first iteration of Opportunities and Interests circulated in mid-morning, the presidents identified some general kinds of engagement that could make meaningful contributions to the professional lives of faculty and staff members. To help stimulate thinking about possibilities, the story was recounted of how the American University of Cairo (AUC) sought the assistance of two athletics directors from colleges in the U.S. in developing sports and recreational programming and policies. With a new campus newly constructed on the outskirts of Cairo AUC had, for the first time, space for these activities. The question was: what was a constructive way to approach sports activities within the context of the goals of a liberal arts education? The exchange of information and insight that occurred in that visit contributed to the development of an educationally appropriate program at AUC while simultaneously being a powerful professional and cultural development experience for the athletics directors.

Another instance of this principle will occur this spring, when a political science professor from Allegheny College in the U.S., who has extensive faculty development expertise, will visit Bratislava International School of Liberal Arts (BISLA) to convene seminars on an approach to teaching that seeks to engage students actively in the subject matter. The announcement of this opportunity to a dozen U.S. liberal arts colleges resulted in many candidates for this opportunity; the person selected was chosen based on a review of credentials by the BISLA leadership. He will serve as the first Endeavor Fellow of the Global Liberal Arts Alliance. These initial actions of the Global Liberal Arts Alliance exemplify the kind of benefits the program could have for all participating institutions.

Several presidents suggested that the Global Alliance could establish relationships among partner institutions that, in time, could lead to the development of high-quality study abroad opportunities for students. All too often study abroad programs fail to provide students with the cultural and linguistic immersion that facilitates the development of global perspective and understanding. The degree of interest expressed in this prospect made clear that study abroad could in time become an important feature of the Global Liberal Arts Alliance. Before any such arrangements can be pursued, however, it is necessary to build linkages between key administrators and faculty members of different institutions who can make such programs succeed.

Among the general ideas for linkages the presidents offered were:

- Providing opportunities for exchanges or study tours among administrators with similar responsibilities to learn how different institutions are approaching particularly vexing challenges.
- A direct linkage between an institution that has a particular need and one or more institutions with faculty or administrators who have the experience and expertise to assist the institution in addressing that need.
- Create programs that allow a faculty member from one nation to serve for a short or extended period of time in residence at a college or university of another nation, interacting with faculty and students, learning about the institution, and contributing to intercultural understanding through individual consultation, lectures, or informal talks.
- Convening workshops (possibly in a summer school format) that provide faculty members with mentoring in different styles of pedagogy that are well suited to the goals of liberal arts education – and to engage faculty members of several nations in conversations about curriculum and course design.
- Convening a Middle Eastern and Islamic studies program – most likely on a summer workshop basis – examining the Middle East in global perspective, with an emphasis on developing stronger bonds of understanding between Islam and other cultures or spiritual traditions.
- A project to explore the nature and value of the liberal arts as practiced among the colleges and universities of the Global Alliance, with a goal of determining the kind of messages participating institutions would find it valuable to convey to a transnational audience.
- Convening international studies directors and interested faculty members to explore possibilities for establishing study abroad opportunities in different nations – particularly in settings where such opportunities do not currently exist.

In the final segment of the meeting, Rick Detweiler outlined key principles of the Global Liberal Arts Alliance.

- The Alliance will function on the principle of exchanging time rather than money. Rather than requiring direct exchange between any two institutions in the Alliance, the program will keep a record of time a given institution expends and time it receives from any institutional partner.

- A primary emphasis of the Alliance is to contribute to the professional development of faculty members and administrators through convenings and interactions that allow for meaningful engagement with their counterparts in other nations.
- The program will be managed by the Great Lakes Colleges Association (GLCA) in the U.S. Providing U.S. faculty members with opportunities for increased global perspective is a central mission objective of the GLCA. Rick Detweiler, who is President of the GLCA, will also serve as the principal officer of the Global Alliance.
- GLCA program officer, Adedayo Adekson, will have primary responsibility for coordinating the activities of the Global Alliance, maintaining a web site and regular communication with those involved in Alliance projects.

Next Steps

In closing, it was noted that the immediate next step would be to revise the initial list of Opportunities and Interests that presidents had submitted on Friday morning (these revised lists appear as Appendix C to this document). Presidents agreed to share these lists with members of their own campus communities, to revise and expand both the Opportunity and Interest statements of their institutions as necessary, and to return a revised list to Adedayo Adekson at the Global Alliance (Adekson@glca.org). At the same time, it was agreed that the Global Alliance would prepare a summary of the meeting, which this document has sought to provide.

After receiving updated versions of the Opportunities and Interests statements from each participating president, the Global Alliance will contact each president to discuss scenarios for possible exchanges or programming opportunities that list has identified. A number of specific requests for exchanges have already been made by participating presidents.

The strong theme in closing was the need for the Global Alliance to identify timely opportunities for immediate action – a focused set of compelling ideas that the Global Alliance can begin to implement in the near future for the purpose of enhancing the liberal arts education of its participating colleges.

*Submitted by:
Gregory Wegner
GLCA*

Appendix A

List of Presidents, Institutions, and Nations

Name	School	City/Country
Samuel Abraham	Bratislava International School of Libera Arts	Bratislava, Slovakia
Peter Armacost	Forman Christian College	Lahore, Pakistan
David Arnold	The American University of Cairo	New Cairo, Egypt
Douglas Bennett	Earlham College	Indiana, USA
James Bultman	Hope College	Michigan, USA
Brian Casey	DePauw University	Indiana, USA
Grant Cornwell	The College of Wooster	Ohio, USA
David Horner	The American College of Greece	Athens, Greece
David Huwiler	American University of Bulgaria	Blagoevgrad, Bulgaria
Haifa Jamal Al-Lail	Effat University	Jeddah, Saudi Arabia
Rock Jones	Ohio Wesleyan University	Ohio, USA
Dale Knobel	Denison University	Ohio, USA
James Mullen Jr.	Allegheny College	Pennsylvania, USA
Erik Nielsen	Franklin College of Switzerland	Lugano, Switzerland
S. Georgia Nugent	Kenyon College	Ohio, USA
Driss Ouaouicha	Al Akhawayn University	Ifrane, Morocco
Franco Pavoncello	John Cabot University	Rome, Italy
Donna Randall	Albion College	Michigan, USA
Celeste Schenck	The American University of Paris	Paris, France
C. Michael Smith	American University of Nigeria	Yola, Adamawa State, Nigeria
Patrick White	Wabash College	Indiana, USA
Eileen Wilson-Oyelaran	Kalamazoo College	Michigan, USA
FROM THE GREAT LAKES COLLEGES ASSOCIATION:		
Adedayo Adekson	GLCA	Michigan, USA
Richard Detweiler	GLCA	Michigan, USA
Gregory Wegner	GLCA	Michigan, USA