

A New International Identity

Why every student should go abroad

By E. GORDON GEE

Our students need on-site, hands-on discovery to negotiate successfully in our ever-flatter world.

My byline announces only half of me—the American from out West and advocate of American higher education half.

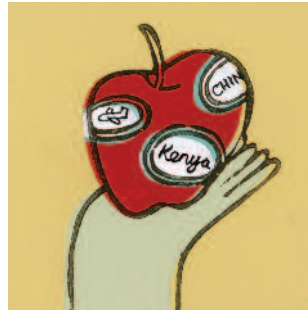
However, on a recent Saturday I acquired a new birthday (not a bad thing at my age) and a new name. And along with both came a new international identity.

At an event celebrating the International Affairs Scholars program at Ohio State, participants in the program's recent trip to Senegal held a naming ceremony in my honor. To the accompaniment of a kora, an ancient 21-string African harp, trip leader Professor Magbaily Fyle welcomed me afresh into the world by whispering my new name into each ear, then introduced me to the audience—not as Gordon Gee but as Falilou.

Such a naming ceremony is usually for newborns, who, it is believed, should be the first to know how others will call them. In my case, the ceremony had additional resonance. Right here in Columbus, Ohio, receiving a Senegalese name in addition to the one my parents gave me many decades ago in Vernal, Utah, I was reminded as never before just how interconnected and interdependent we have become in an increasingly borderless world.

I understood with new clarity that, as a university president, I had new opportunities, indeed, new imperatives to ensure that when students leave us, they are prepared to be leaders in an environment that is defined by third-world food shortages, global climate change, a burgeoning population, shifting geopolitical tensions, the threat of terrorism, and the need for alternative energy sources.

If our students are to tackle and bring solutions to such challenges, they cannot confine their enquiries to the classroom and laboratory. We know—and they know—that the textbook and the test tube do not hold all the answers. Nor are they a sufficient route



to understanding other cultures. In our global society, which has been described as “wired together so tightly that a short circuit can fry us all,” understanding other cultures is the 21st-century key to respecting and valuing differences, recognizing and building on commonalities, and forging a more civil and democratic future.

As Gordon Gee, I have long believed that our students need on-site, hands-on discovery to negotiate successfully in our ever-flatter world. Now as Falilou, I am convinced that an international experience is an essential element of every student's education.

This conviction—unapologetically, in fact, enthusiastically egalitarian—is the modern-day evolution of an elitist post-Renaissance notion. Though we humans have been wandering the globe for millennia, going abroad became formally linked with education only in the late 17th century when affluent Englishmen established a pattern of travel that typically included Paris, Geneva, and the major cities of Italy. The Grand Tour, as it came to be called, was meant to be the pleasurable finale to a young gentleman's liberal schooling. Its value lay, first, in the opportunities it afforded for exposure to the cultural artifacts of antiquity and the Renaissance. Just as important, or perhaps more important, it provided the upper-class British sojourner with access to the aristocratic society of the European continent. The Grand Tour was thus primarily about social credentialing. This prototype for study abroad had little to do with the cross-cultural contact that is so fundamental to modern international academic programs—and beyond.

Today, cross-cultural contact is a fact of life. Thanks to the Internet, e-mail, the cell phone, and the PDA, international news and information, friends and colleagues, products and images are but a click away. What is more, in the current crucible of cultures, we do not need to take a trip—real or virtual—to encounter cultures beyond our own. At Ohio State,

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ILLUSTRATION BY CAREY SOKOLOFF FOR CASE

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I revel in working daily with students, staff, faculty, and administrators who represent countries from around the globe. I suspect that just about anyone anywhere could make a similar statement. That is why cross-cultural understanding is the most important quality to be instilled in our 21st-century students. An international experience is the best way to instill that vital understanding.

If study abroad is to be a regular, routine, and required component in our curricula, students will need new forms of assistance. Just as we are working hard to open the doors of the university to low-income and first-generation students who historically have not had an opportunity to experience the American dream, we must likewise eliminate the economic barriers to those same students realizing an international dream. Economic access must become the partner of international access.

Providing such access will challenge the nation's institutions of higher learning to expand their portfolios of international support. We must offer more international scholarships that are based on need. We should consider increasing the number and reach of our study abroad programs. We may also need to simplify the application and matriculation process and remove the financial disadvantages of sending students abroad.

In addition, we must respond to the growing desire for broader international options. Nationwide, students are telling us that they want programs that offer a choice of duration, and they want to be able to go abroad at different points in their academic career. More and more, they are seeking experiences in nontraditional destinations, and increasing numbers of them are electing to study abroad more than once.

Last year, some 200,000 of America's college students participated in at least one international program. Here at Ohio State, we offer 150 study abroad programs that support and augment coursework across our curriculum. We also provide numerous additional opportunities for students to

work, volunteer, and teach abroad. Our international efforts are steered by the Office of International Affairs, and our students' readiness for international study is promoted by the activities of our area studies centers and our widely respected international studies program. We also have a marvelous new facility, the World Media and Culture Center, which is putting Ohio State on the map for training in the 30 or so languages and cultures offered by our foreign language departments.

With these opportunities and support systems, a respectable 20 percent of our undergraduates study abroad before graduation. But that is far too few. A goal of my presidency is to provide incentives to increase that percentage dramatically.

At my naming ceremony, Megan, one of the International Affairs Scholars just back from her study tour in Senegal, talked about her experience. The trip marked her first time on an airplane and her first venture beyond North America. "To witness life, so different from mine but yet so vibrant and thriving," she said, "was incredible." If the conclusion of our British gentleman's Grand Tour signaled the end of international experience, for Megan, Senegal was only a beginning. In her own words, the trip was "a rebirth."

When we send our students into the world in the service of global tasks, we want them to know that same sense of rebirth in the presence of another culture, that same sense of life that begins only with the start of cross-cultural understanding.

As Falilou, I have experienced that rebirth. As Gordon Gee, I understand that my new international identity is a call to action. **■**

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