Northern Arizona U. Overhauls Curriculum to Focus on 'Global Competence'

Angel Lombardi, a third-year dental-hygiene student at Northern Arizona U., examines a 4-year-old's teeth at the Yavapai-Apache Health Center, as the child's mother encourages her to open her mouth. Working with different cultures within the United States helped prepare Ms. Lombardi for working abroad, she says.

By Ian Wilhelm

Flagstaff, Ariz.
On a recent Tuesday at Northern Arizona University, Car-ly Farr made an end-of-semester presentation about the woodlands of Zambia. Speaking to her classmates in "Forestry in Developing Countries," the junior said that with human settlements and the demand for fuel threatening Miombo trees and other flora, perhaps the country should try a "cash for clunkers" deal, encouraging Zambians to trade in their old woodstoves for energy-efficient ones.

Ms. Farr's ability to connect a strategy to remove gas-guzzling cars from America's roads with ecological problems in Africa, essentially drawing a link between a national and
international issue, is a skill the university wants to develop in all its students. And the course, with its emphasis on understanding environmental challenges that cross borders, in many ways reflects the global ambitions of this university.

In a campuswide effort, Northern Arizona is reorienting what it teaches so that every graduate is "globally competent," broadly defined as being able to communicate across cultures and understand the intersection of local and international topics. A 25,000-student university whose main campus lies below the San Francisco Peaks, it joins hundreds of other higher-education institutions, including liberal-arts colleges, community colleges, and other public universities, that are taking steps to better prepare undergraduates for a globalized world.

Enlarge Image

Laura Segall For The Chronicle

Harvey Charles, vice provost for international education at Northern Arizona U., has tried to make sure that professors are heavily involved in the global-learning effort.

"It's more than international exchanges, it's more than sending students overseas," says John D. Haeger, president of the university, about efforts to internationalize the campus. "Eventually as you head down this road it has to change the curriculum in substantial ways."

Economic and Social Reasons

But global learning presents challenges: What exactly does it mean to be globally competent? Should global learning be in the core curriculum or infused into the majors? And how do you get faculty members from a broad range of disciplines to support it?

Fernando M. Reimers, director of global education and of international-education policy at Harvard University, is a staunch advocate for globalizing the curriculum, but he acknowledges it is not an easy feat. "The idea that the curriculum can be an ever-expanding pie is a luxury," he says. Derek Bok, a former president of Harvard University, once compared revamping a curriculum to moving a cemetery, says Mr. Reimers, and with global learning, "there are good, meaningful reasons why it's hard to move the cemetery."

The effort to be in the vanguard of global higher education may seem a curious one for Northern Arizona. It's relatively remote, located in a midsize city more than two hours by car from a major airport and in a state that is considered by some to be unfriendly to immigrants and Latinos.
But Mr. Haeger says the impetus to better prepare students for a globalized world is both an economic and a social one. The change will help Northern Arizona meet the needs of Flagstaff companies that have international operations, like Machine Solutions, a medical supplier, and broaden the worldview of students. "A lot of our kids come out of the small, rural environments, and they just have never thought about global engagement. That's just not part of their makeup," Mr. Haeger says.

Competition may also play a role. The university is overshadowed nationally by its peers in the south, the University of Arizona and Arizona State University, and the change could further distinguish it.

The guiding hand behind Northern Arizona's global ambitions is Harvey Charles, the vice provost for international education. Hired in 2007, he has helped more than double the number of foreign students to around 5 percent of the 18,000 students on the main campus (the university has 34 satellite campuses throughout the state). The tuition money from some of those students has helped pay for the university's growing international efforts during a time of budget cuts. (State support for the university has declined 36 percent, to $103-million, since 2009.)

While in charge of international programs, Mr. Charles has sought to play a behind-the-scenes role in the curriculum overhaul. As a member of the administration—the "dark side," as he refers to it—he has made sure that professors do the heavy lifting in determining how to define and teach global learning.

"The first thing that has to be done is for this kind of agenda to be embraced by the entire university," he says. "You don't want administrators to be perceived as the ones driving this."

To that end, the university in 2008 formed a panel to examine all aspects of campus internationalization. The 40-person committee included officials from student services and the administration, but primarily comprised well-respected professors, the "gray lions," as one faculty member put it, who could influence their fellow scholars.

Two years later, the Faculty Senate adopted the panel's recommendations on global learning, embracing three core ideas that "reflect the agenda of global education in the early 21st century." They are global engagement, environmental sustainability, and diversity. (Two other themes, self and society and transcultural and translingual competency, were discarded to make the changes more manageable for professors.)

The ideas dovetail with the university's historic work in conservation and with American Indians, which includes an institute that promotes academic and service projects with tribes and a new Native American cultural center.

With the broad themes defined, the administration asked its six colleges and more than 30 academic departments, including vocational programs like dental hygiene, to survey what global elements already existed in their curricular and cocurricular offerings and submit ideas about how to strengthen them. So far 80 percent of the departments have produced reports outlining what they are doing.
Differing Approaches
For most universities, globalizing the curriculum means providing more courses that include overseas travel, adding new general-education requirements on global perspectives, or offering a global certificate, which students can earn if they complete a set of internationally focused courses.

The Association of American Colleges and Universities supports the general-education approach and has worked with more than 100 colleges to integrate global learning into their core curricula. One of those colleges, Arcadia University, in 2008 added "global connections" seminars, courses that stress interdisciplinary thinking about global issues and often include a cross-cultural experience off campus, whether overseas or in the Philadelphia area where the university is based. For example, students in a course on global immigration visit the city's famous Italian Market and meet with workers of Italian, Vietnamese, and Mexican descent to understand historic and modern population flows.

Another new course studies the global connections in baseball, examining how the sport draws players from around the world, including Latin America, and has dealt with integration of black players and other minorities.

Miami University, in Oxford, Ohio, also created new offerings after it added general-education requirements in "global perspectives" in 2010 (requirements in the fine arts, humanities, and social sciences were reduced). One of them, "Metal on Metal: Engineering and Globalization in Heavy-Metal Music," examines the genre's growth around the world thanks in part to advances in recording technology.

Other institutions have built upon existing courses.

The Minneapolis Community and Technical College recently started to offer a global-studies certificate. But a broader goal is to emphasize the international and cross-cultural elements that already exist in the curriculum.

Ranae Hanson, an English professor at the college who is leading its globalization effort, says occasionally professors seem ignorant of such pre-existing global components in their own programs.

For example, "If air-traffic control isn't global, I don't know what is," she says, noting that the aviation industry has to deal with international laws, different languages, and worldwide weather patterns.

Northern Arizona makes students take at least one class from its global-diversity catalog as part of its general-education requirements and wants every student to have an opportunity to study overseas or in an American Indian community. But to Mr. Charles, those efforts are piecemeal and don't touch every student. Transfer students, for example, would miss global elements if they were offered only in general-education classes, and only a small percentage of students usually opt to study abroad.

His institution's approach of working within the academic departments, he says, will lead to wider change. "It truly means no student—not a single student—escapes this commitment if in fact it's grounded in the disciplines," he says.
Offering Incentives

To encourage faculty members to lead this work in their own fields, the administration offered incentives: $4,000 stipends or a reduced course load. The goal was to build on existing courses, not create new ones from whole cloth.

"Forestry in Developing Countries" is a prime example. It incorporates all three themes, and nothing major has been added. The instructors do say they have a better understanding now of how the class reflects the university's broad goals. The School of Forestry, which offers the course, has made more tangible changes, such as adding more international readings to an introductory course and offering new opportunities to study in Nicaragua and Thailand.

Other departments have taken steps to convey how existing classes teach global skills.

For example, the department of dental hygiene has long conducted clinics at nearby American Indian reservations. It is now stressing that those interactions can help students work within international cultures, whether it be Latino immigrants in Phoenix or patients thousands of miles away.

Angel Lombardi, a third-year dental-hygiene student, says visits to the Yavapai-Apache and other tribal areas have helped her develop communication skills she put to use in India. On a university-sponsored trip over Christmas break to Mainpat, she provided dental care in a Tibetan refugee camp. While there were many obstacles she'd never faced before, like lack of consistent electricity, she arrived knowing that, given the language barrier, she needed to demonstrate a procedure before starting.

"You've got to show them a bit of what you're going to do," she says.

Most departments here are like forestry or dental hygiene—making tweaks here and there to courses. But a few have been bolder.

Economics started a new upper-level course on international economic development; in the fall the department of gender and women's studies will offer "Transnational Feminism"; and "Popular Australian and U.S. Movies in Everyday Life" was offered for the first time this spring by the electronic-media-and-film department.

Janna Jones, an associate professor who developed the film class, received a stipend to look at global learning within her department. She says the process helped inspire her to teach, via Skype, the new course with an instructor at the University of Wollongong, in Australia, and describes herself as an "early adopter" of global learning.

Just a Fad?

Some faculty members are less enthusiastic. A few professors quietly say the globalization effort is a fad, with instructors fitting their courses under the global umbrella just to please the administration. At least one department, mathematics and statistics, has no plans to introduce global-learning elements, saying it simply doesn't fit within the discipline.

Indeed, global learning can be a tough sell to the hard sciences.
Phillip A. Mlsna, an associate professor of electrical and computer engineering, says his initial reaction to the global-learning project was, "How do we put this new thing in this already stuffed-to-the-gills curriculum?"

Once he learned the department wasn't going to have to "gut" its courses, but enhance what it was already doing, he says the idea became appealing. The engineering department is now considering a new course on the history of science and technology, which would show how different cultures have contributed to modern science. (Read about an engineering program with an international focus.)

Professors in disciplines like history or political science, where a global perspective has long been standard, largely embrace Northern Arizona's efforts, but occasionally have their own concerns.

Sanjam Ahluwalia, an associate professor of history and women's studies, applauds the university's goal of globalizing the curriculum, but she warns if done poorly, it can simply strengthen Western stereotypes of what the rest of the world looks like and gloss over the perspectives of other nations.

"If you're only looking for connectivity, then these local nuances slip out of your vision," she says.

Outside of Northern Arizona, some educators have the opposite concern: that an effort to create "global citizens" diminishes the role of American history and civic education.

Colleges should not "assume that students can meaningfully explore America's role in the world community without fundamental knowledge of their own history and the workings of our free institutions," says Michael B. Poliakoff, vice president of policy for the American Council of Trustees and Alumni. He adds that bolstering foreign-language skills is the single most important step toward understanding other cultures and needs to be stressed more as part of efforts to globalize the curriculum.

Regardless of the approach, Mr. Reimers, of Harvard, says that the world is a rapidly changing place and that producing students who are prepared to work and understand it is the key challenge for a 21st-century education.

"Globalization is not a new phenomenon, but we now all need to understand it in a deeper way," he says. "For a while we thought we could sprinkle in a few courses on global. I don't think that model will work anymore."

At Northern Arizona at least, that philosophy appears to be taking root.

"There are different levels of buy-in from faculty" in her department, says Ms. Jones, the media and film professor, but the process has begun and more professors are warming up to the idea.

"We don't become global suddenly," she says, but "why wouldn't we want to expand our students' world?"