On Campus

Columbia and the World: The University’s Globalization Task Force

By
Lee C. Bollinger '71LAW
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Last year I asked a large group of faculty to be part of a task force, which I would chair, on globalization and the University. The reason for such a group is both important and clear: Given the extraordinary changes occurring around the world, it is time that we ask whether the University in its various roles (research, education, and public service) is responding to and addressing the issues before us.

There can be little doubt that the world is undergoing a transformation. The spread of democracy, the breakdown of economic barriers to trade in an emerging world economy, the extraordinary rise of mass communications, conflicts over the deepest of human beliefs, and intermixing of peoples and cultures on an unprecedented scale all have ushered in a world of baffling complexity. Profound questions raised by these new global trends deserve the kind of study and reflection that only the academy can offer.

Columbia University is, of course, among the most international of all universities in the United States. Besides having one of the very largest populations of international students on the campus, and a faculty drawn from every part of the world as well, Columbia has outstanding academic programs covering every part of the globe.

We are, for example, justly proud of the Weatherhead East Asian Institute, and our other international centers, which are by all counts some of the best of their kind in the nation. Our Mailman School of Public Health has superb programs to greatly reduce the number of maternal deaths from pregnancy and childbirth complications and treat HIV/AIDS in resource-poor nations. The Earth Institute is providing seminal scholarship and public service by combining science, engineering, and health and

social sciences to address the pressing needs of developing societies. And Columbia University's involvement with the medical community in Asia dates back to 1921, when the College of Physicians and Surgeons helped establish Peking Union Medical College, the first Western medical institution in China.

Meanwhile, we continue to build alliances between Columbia and overseas institutions. The School of International and Public Affairs is working with prestigious partners, the London School of Economics and Sciences Po, to launch a Global Network for Public Policy Education with the world's leading graduate schools. The Law School's Public Interest Law Initiative (PILI) has established headquarters in Budapest and Moscow. These kinds of international ties greatly increase our already innumerable opportunities for our students to study and intern abroad.

Yet, the globalization task force must consider critically important questions about where we should be heading in the near to far term. Should we seek more international students, especially at the undergraduate level? Are our intellectual resources appropriately aligned with the most important issues in our contemporary and future world? What needs to be done to bring together — even more than we already are doing — the extraordinary expertise throughout the University? To what extent should we direct that collective diverse expertise toward specific problems or projects? Does the organization of our scholarship and teaching around the concept of regional studies provide us with sufficient attention to the global phenomena that seem increasingly to be shaping every part of the world? For the future, what form should Columbia's presence take around the globe? Should it be with few or many universities and institutions? Should it be a physical building or a set of alliances, or a combination of both?

These are vexing but exhilarating questions, which over time we must answer as Columbia charts its way into this new century. One thing we know for sure, namely that Columbia University — by its traditions and by its location in New York City — is ideally situated to contribute to this new and vastly more interconnected world. The role of the Task Force on Globalization and the University is to help us make that contribution.

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