



AIEA OCCASIONAL PAPER

OCTOBER 2018

Internationalization at U.S. Public Comprehensive Universities: Three Case Studies

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INTRODUCTION

This paper highlights the efforts of U.S. public comprehensive universities to help advance higher education internationalization. Known in part for their legacy as early teacher's colleges or technical colleges, public comprehensive universities have unique institutional missions that are steep in local, historical ties to their respective communities. This paper draws from three cases of public comprehensives in Kentucky, Maryland and Michigan, highlighting their trajectories to make internationalization central to the institutional mission. This is a needed contribution to a generally underemphasized segment of U.S. higher education. The authors contend that this paper, an extension of a related panel at the 2018 AIEA Annual Conference, is part of the beginnings of necessary conversation about the role of public comprehensive universities to advance U.S. higher education internationalization in such a politically charged and complicated time in the country.



U.S. public higher education continues to face a myriad of stressors including diminished public sentiment, reduced fiscal support from state appropriations, and warning signs of national demographic changes that threaten future enrollments across several regions (Mitchell, Leachman, and Masterson, 2016; Fingerhut, 2017; Selingo, 2017). In the wake of the 2016 U.S. Presidential election, higher education internationalization is experiencing early signs of disruption with the recent decline of overall international student enrollments at U.S. institutions and proposed federal budget cuts to international education programs that support student mobility and research (Saul, 2018; Steele-Figueroa, 2018). The 2018 AIEA Annual Conference theme, “The Internationalization Imperative in Turbulent Times” accurately depicted the current climate faced by SIOs across U.S. campuses, and the authors of this paper—in their panel session “Linking institutional mission with internationalization goals at public regional comprehensive universities”—brought much needed attention to the unique challenges and opportunities for SIOs to advance internationalization at public comprehensive universities.

INTERNATIONALIZATION AT PUBLIC COMPREHENSIVE UNIVERSITIES

The scant research on public comprehensives or as Henderson (2007) defined, state comprehensive universities (SCUs), highlights these public institutions with historic roots tied to vocational needs such as teaching or vocational training. From the late 19th and throughout the 20th century, these “normal schools” or technical colleges expanded into regional universities that vied for the institutional prestige enjoyed by public flagships while maintaining historical missions connected to regional and local priorities (Henderson, 2007, 2009; Hendrickson, Mueller & Strand, 2011). Within the Carnegie classification of institutions of higher education (2018), comprehensive universities are codified as institutions that offer at least 50 master’s degrees and a maximum of 20 doctoral degrees. According to Carnegie (2018), there are around 270 institutions that are identified as public comprehensive institutions. Public comprehensive universities are also known for their intense faculty workloads, which can include teaching schedules of up to four courses per semester, plus research along with institutional and community service expectations (Henderson, 2007, 2009; Hendrickson, Mueller & Strand, 2011). Perhaps most importantly, recent scholarship highlights that public comprehensives enroll the majority of U.S. students that attend public four-year institutions with a student diversity that encompasses ability, socioeconomics, race/ethnicity and employment status (Fryar, 2015; Griffin, 2017).

Still, there is a relative inattention to public comprehensives in higher education research including a focus on internationalization at such institutions. To address this gap, recent doctoral research by Dr. Jermain Griffin, a professorial lecturer in the American University School of Education and research consultant with the American Council on Education’s Center for Internationalization and Global Engagement, explored internationalization activity at public comprehensives. This research revealed that iterations of comprehensive internationalization at public comprehensives occurred through dialogue among faculty colleagues and staff personnel that reached a tipping



point of change, and through institutional leadership making difficult choices to situate internationalization among its key institutional priorities (Griffin, 2017).

Through this research and the enduring work of three senior international officers (SIOs) from public comprehensives, an AIEA panel was developed to inform participants at the 2018 AIEA conference of the unique challenges and opportunities to support internationalization at their institutions. Drs. Craig T. Cobane (Western Kentucky University - WKU), Mark Schaub (Grand Valley State University - GVSU), and Brian N. Stiegler (Salisbury University - SU) drew from several decades of expertise to present their cases in the AIEA conference panel. Unpacking the SIO perspective in this context was critical for participants to understand the urgent need to recognize the key role of public comprehensives in making the case for internationalization to America's urban, suburban, and rural communities that continue to be served by these types of institutions.

CASE STUDY – WESTERN KENTUCKY UNIVERSITY (WKU)

WKU, founded as a State normal school for teacher training in 1906, is located in Bowling Green, Kentucky. In 1966, it transitioned from a state college to public regional university (Western Kentucky University, 2018). When Dr. Cobane, who served as WKU's SIO from 2012-2017 while also leading the Mahurin Honors College, was first appointed SIO in 2012, the institution had gone through five SIOs within a seven-year span and international programs were struggling. With an overall student enrollment of more than 20,000, including 35 percent first-generation students and 33 percent Pell-eligible, Cobane observed a need for greater strategizing and coordination to internationalize the on-campus experience and both increased administrative and financial support for study abroad.

Cobane collaborated with the institution's senior leadership and faculty to create a more streamlined effort towards internationalization with the following key foci: faculty internationalization, global learning both in the classroom and via co-curricular experiences and increasing accessibility to education abroad opportunities. With the critical support of senior leadership, scarce resources were committed to enhance participation in each of these areas. Additionally, WKU's decision to construct an Honors College International Center (opened in 2016) made a strong statement about the importance of internationalization to the WKU mission. From 2011-2017, WKU would see its participation rate in education abroad activities jump by 37 percent (Cobane, Griffin, Stiegler, & Schuab, 2018). Because of the nature of the students who attend WKU, special efforts were made to lower administrative and financial barriers to study abroad. Finally, WKU via the Office of Scholarship Development (OSD) helps students develop scholar development plans (SDP), creating for each student "an organizing principle that both shapes the students experience and guides cross-unit collaboration" (Cobane & Jennings, 2017). These student-centered SDPs in combination with a series of new institutional grants (e.g., Enhancing Diversity in Global Education—EDGE; Alternate and Supplementation Gilman Grants, Passport Scholarships, etc.) help increase access and diversify study abroad and resulted in WKU earning a "2018 Excellence in Diversity & Inclusion in International Education Award" from Diversity Abroad.



Additionally, the focus on SDPs to help students get access to external sources of funding to support international educational opportunities has led to greater participation and success with prestigious and nationally competitive scholarships (e.g., Benjamin Gilman, J. William Fulbright, David Boren, etc.). WKU's emphasis has resulted in a dramatic increase in the number of students earning Fulbright, Boren and Gilman scholarships, in addition to other opportunities like the Department of State Critical Language Scholarship (CLS), the United States Foreign Service Internship Program (USFSIP), Charles B. Rangel International Affairs Summer Enrichment Program, and Thomas R. Pickering Foreign Affairs Fellowship. As a result, WKU has ranked among the top Fulbright producing master's comprehensive universities in the country for five of the past six years.

Although primarily for financial reasons, WKU also focused on increasing its international student population. Between 2009 and 2015, WKU increased its international student enrollment more than 120 percent (2009 – 2015 Institute of International Education, *Open Doors Report on International Educational Exchange*). More recently, volatility of international enrollment has also affected WKU, which has seen a significant drop in its international student enrollment. Finally, like many institutions WKU is confronted with the twin challenges of continuing to make the case for internationalization as the proposition-value question for higher education and addressing growing U.S. antagonism towards international students and their effects on the state (Blackford, 2017; Mudd, 2018).

CASE STUDY – GRAND VALLEY STATE UNIVERSITY (GVSU)

In Michigan, seven public comprehensives and eight research institutions, including the University of Michigan and Michigan State, compete for scarce state appropriations and for students. One advantage for GVSU, a young public comprehensive institution established in 1960 as Grand Valley State College, is that it serves the Greater Grand Rapids metropolitan area with over 25,000 total enrollments in Fall 2017. Despite its geographic positioning in the state, GVSU lags in state appropriations – as Figure 1 shows – in comparison to its peers.



State Appropriation per Student					
	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18
Wayne State	7,682	8,176	8,455	8,736	8,914
Michigan Tech	6,816	7,485	7,222	7,399	7,290
U of M-Ann Arbor	6,506	6,745	6,844	7,044	7,200
Lake Superior	5,058	5,712	6,075	6,421	6,971
Northern	4,872	5,362	5,617	5,998	6,385
Michigan State	5,579	5,819	5,848	5,979	6,076
Western	4,503	4,898	5,066	5,288	5,494
State Average	4,776	5,079	5,182	5,345	5,476
Ferris	3,735	4,022	4,149	4,307	4,420
Eastern	3,650	3,909	3,953	4,207	4,364
Central	3,267	3,647	3,883	3,944	4,117
U of M-Dearborn	3,375	3,543	3,615	3,681	3,748
Saginaw Valley	2,828	3,059	3,193	3,409	3,577
U of M-Flint	2,962	3,157	3,164	3,266	3,444
Grand Valley	2,588	2,835	2,943	3,040	3,087
Oakland	2,797	2,896	2,831	2,868	2,872

Figure 1: State appropriations per student for colleges and universities in the state of Michigan, 2017.

The challenges for higher education internationalization at GVSU include statewide declines in student enrollments for a majority of the state’s colleges and universities, further exacerbating the competition between its seven public comprehensives (MLive, 2017). A troubling sign for the state is a projected drop in the number of high school graduates the state produces annually from roughly 123,000 in 2010 to as low as 84,000 in the early 2030s (Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, 2018). Additionally, international student enrollments are reportedly down across a majority of institutions in the state (Mori, 2018).

Dr. Schaub, SIO and Associate Professor of Writing, has worked at GVSU since 1999, and has observed the institution’s international strategy evolve over several years through ongoing collaborative efforts with senior leadership and faculty. After participating in the American Council on Education’s Internationalization Laboratory from 2012-2014, GVSU decided to channel its internationalization efforts in two critical areas: Global learning across GVSU curriculum and building a global learning campus environment that included more international students and optimized the invaluable resource of international faculty (Cobane, Griffin, Stiegler, & Schaub, 2018).

GVSU successes included 14 percent of graduating bachelors-level students studying abroad. This rate is impressive, given the overall student population is comprised of 40 percent Pell-eligible students and 40 percent first-generation college students. GVSU’s international student population has grown from 177 students in 2005 to 430 students in 2016 with students representing more than 100 countries including China, India, and Saudi Arabia (Grand Valley State University, 2018). Schaub credits support from GVSU leadership and campus allies for internationalization progress. Additionally, he highlighted invaluable alumni connections for support with recruiting diverse students to attend the public comprehensive and to see both the intrinsic and transferrable value of education abroad experiences (Cobane, Griffin, Stiegler, & Schaub, 2018).



CASE STUDY – SALISBURY UNIVERSITY

Salisbury University in coastal Maryland, established as a two-year teacher's college in 1925 and as a four-year institution in 1934, is part of the University of Maryland system. A mid-sized public comprehensive, Salisbury's total enrollment was just over 8,700 for 2017. The institution has experienced significant growth in enrollment with an increase of 43 percent between 1999 and 2013 (Cox, 2017). Still, with fewer than 9,000 students, Salisbury is less than half the size of GVSU and WKU and represents a different type of public comprehensive university. Mid-sized public comprehensives, defined by enrollment from 7,500-15,000, enjoy some advantages in flexibility and nimbleness over larger comprehensive publics. However, they tend to have fewer professional staff dedicated to international education than their larger cousins and can struggle even harder to have international initiatives register with senior leadership as a priority.

Salisbury had made great process in comprehensive internationalization from 2009-14 covering two different five-year comprehensive internationalization strategic plans. (Salisbury University, 2009, 2014) During that time, international student enrollment more than tripled and study abroad enrollment increased by 82 percent. In the on-campus curriculum, the university created a new major in international business and five new interdisciplinary minors in regional area studies. It expanded the traditional foreign language offerings offered on-campus from the traditional Spanish, French, and German to include Korean, Japanese, and Mandarin, while adding for the first time a small but symbolic two-semester foreign language graduation requirement for all BA degrees (except Economics). (Salisbury University, 2017)

In 2014-15 Salisbury was included for the first (and only) time in the top 40 list in the Open Doors Report published by the Institute of International Education for total number of students studying abroad among Carnegie-classified Master's universities. (Institute of International Education, 2016). Particularly impressive was that the growth in study abroad did not all depend upon short-term faculty-led programs of less than four weeks. From 2006-15 Salisbury quadrupled the number of students earning credits on mid-length semester study abroad programs, the area of US-based study abroad that has been the most stubborn to show improvement at the national level. It is worth noting, that in that 2014-15 Open Doors list, less than half of the Master's universities in the top 40 list for study abroad were public comprehensives, although public comprehensive universities dominate the enrollment at the national level in this Carnegie category.

Dr. Stiegler, SIO and Associate Professor of Spanish at Salisbury, highlighted that the key to success was a quadrupling in the number of active global partnerships (from 6 to 28) with which Salisbury engaged in a multitude of activities that enhanced international education. One of the most important advances was becoming certified by the US Department of State to sponsor J-1 visas, allowing the university to invite global scholars as exchange visitors to campus for the first time. There were zero such visitors in 2009 and 18 during academic year 2014-15.

During this period of rapid expansion, the comprehensive internationalization effort received great support from the faculty and the administration. The creation of a new



Center for International Education in 2007 was a catalyst for the growth. Beginning in 2010 the university began a home-grown, self-funded English Language Institute that funded itself and nearly all international recruiting costs for the following five years. The addition of a new International Faculty House in 2012 provided a three-bedroom cottage to host the growing number of global scholars. The number of faculty teaching short-term faculty-led study abroad programs called Global Seminars doubled from twelve in 2008 to twenty-three in 2015.

Despite all the growth during this period, only one additional state-funded full-time staff position was added to any of the areas of international education and the weight of the comprehensive internationalization expansion became too heavy to bear administratively. Since 2015, Salisbury's study abroad numbers have fallen every year, international student numbers have suffered the same fate, the English Language Institute failed to support itself financially for the first time in FY 2016, and the number of global exchange visitor scholars on J-1 visas fell by 50 percent. In short, comprehensive internationalization has struggled to maintain its bandwidth among many strategic priorities on campus. While this narrative is similar at all higher education institutions, it is a particular challenge at public comprehensives.

Stiegler identified that the key for success in such a challenging environment was to not focus so much on the dearth of resources, but to build on strengths and accomplishments of existing initiatives. In order to build a broader coalition of campus and community support, he advised that people need to see the idea of "global" as accessible and relevant to traditional priorities. There are times when comprehensive internationalization simply is not as important a priority at a public comprehensive university and there are times when growth and expansion plateaus, and re-organization and re-definition of goals and plans becomes critical. According to Stiegler, the key was not to bemoan the many opportunities lost or the limits or challenges that seem insurmountable, but to highlight the positive activity that is happening and its importance to the public comprehensive university and its mission (Cobane, Griffin, Stiegler, & Schaub, 2018).

MAKING THE CASE FOR INTERNATIONALIZATION THROUGH PUBLIC COMPREHENSIVES

In a blog post for the American Council on Education, Stiegler (2017) discussed the need for public comprehensive universities to embrace being both provincial and global. With public comprehensives enrolling more than 60 percent of U.S. students in 4-year institutions, the time is right for public comprehensives to assume more leadership on the local and global stage. In 2015, few in Europe and the USA predicted the great crisis in confidence in the global economy, transnational migration, and other key tenants of modern societies engaging with the world that has since become a major narrative in the democracies of the west.



“If we want to teach more future leaders, members of the workforce, and citizens to engage constructively with the world, they must learn at public regional universities that define themselves by their global engagement,” Stiegler (2017)

Participants at the AIEA 2018 conference suggested that more attention be paid to the unique challenges and opportunities for internationalization at public comprehensive institutions. Given the tenuous political climate, headwinds of pending demographic changes, and the ongoing public debate over the cost of higher education, it is no doubt timely for public comprehensive universities to broaden their role in the national conversation on the value and purpose of U.S. higher education.

It can certainly be argued that the future of U.S. higher education internationalization certainly requires more leadership from public comprehensives. This is not simply due to the significant share of U.S. enrollments at these institutions, but also due to the inordinate commitment of time and limited resources from their faculty, staff, and leadership to make higher education internationalization a priority. One critical finding Griffin (2017) shared from his research was how consistent communication within faculty departments and staff offices at public comprehensive campuses served as the linchpin for broader campus advocacy to support initiatives such as internationalizing curricula, the development of strategic plans for internationalization or the advocacy for premium campus space to demonstrate an institutional commitment for internationalization. At public comprehensives, these activities are possible because of the resolve of administrative staff and the grit of faculty teaching 4-4 loads on top of research and service commitments, and also because of student dynamism, which compels institutional leaders to give strong consideration to the importance of internationalization to the institution’s mission.

Griffin’s (2017) research also highlighted anecdotal evidence of public comprehensives linking internationalization with local and regional engagement, based on comments from interviewees in his study. Cobane, Schaub and Stiegler can attest to the critical need for their communities to see and understand the invaluable contributions of public higher education as all three international education leaders serve in institutions located in counties or states that are predominantly Republican. According to a recent Pew Research Center (2017) study, nearly 60 percent of Republican and Republican-leaning voters believed that U.S. colleges and universities have a negative impact on society. It is reasonable to conclude that higher education internationalization is not an exception to this growing negative perception of higher education in some communities. This challenging reality heightens the urgency for U.S. public higher education to make its case for the American public. Higher education internationalization--and its many benefits to communities--has a unique opportunity to be part of a critical conversation.

Now is the time for more public comprehensive institutions to assess the significance of internationalization at their institutions and to articulate its value to campus and community constituents in ways that enhance existing priorities. Public regionals have the unique opportunity to realize a form of internationalization that is very much pertinent to local and regional commitments, yet global in focus. More studies on the impact of internationalization at public comprehensives and their surrounding communities are needed. Additionally, public comprehensives are encouraged to advocate for public higher education through champion organizations such as the AIEA,



the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU), and the American Council on Education (ACE).

Each of the public comprehensives on this study took part in the ACE Internationalization Laboratory (2018) at some point within the last 10 years. All three institutions are in the process of working to implement aspects of internationalization plans developed or refined with support from ACE. More public comprehensives should consider the investment of time and resources to build internationalization plans that serve their campuses and local constituencies. SIOs at public comprehensives are strongly encouraged to share their struggles and successes with advancing internationalization at future AIEA conferences and workshops.

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The **Association of International Education Administrators (AIEA)**, a membership organization formed in November 1982, is composed of institutional leaders engaged in advancing the international dimensions of higher education. The purposes of the Association are to:

- Provide an effective voice on significant issues within international education at all levels,
- Improve and promote international education programming and administration within institutions of higher education,
- Establish and maintain a professional network among international education institutional leaders,
- Cooperate in appropriate ways with other national and international groups having similar interests.

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