Information technology has had a globalizing effect, knocking down many barriers. We can communicate twenty-four hours a day without regard to time zones; we can send information across national boundaries; and we can, with voice-recognition and speech-translation software, converse in languages that we do not even know. In fact, the defining technologies of globalization are computerization, miniaturization, digitization, fiber optics, and the Internet.

From a business perspective, global competition has been one of the most significant forces of change in the last decade. The majority of goods manufactured in the United States are subject to competition from abroad. Even the smallest companies are doing business worldwide. Not only does the United States no longer dominate the world economy, but 95 percent of the world's consumers live outside the United States.

Globalization stimulated by IT has fundamentally transformed the structure not only of industry but also of politics and education. Businesses, countries, and higher education institutions are no longer independent. They now form a global web—highly interconnected and interdependent. Products, industries, technologies, and even jobs no longer depend on the strengths and weaknesses of any one country. Jobs lost at home reappear abroad. U.S. graduates compete with their peers from overseas.

IT is thus making the world smaller at the same time that it is broadening our horizons. Or is it? Are we truly seeing farther? In this global environment, how programs. Both are positive steps, but they fall far short of what is needed—or is possible.

In 1995, the American Council on Education (ACE) stressed the importance of helping students develop the competence to function effectively in a global environment. Many of those recommendations remain valid today. Understanding other cultures, the global economy, and the interdependence of nations is of fundamental significance for students. What is new, perhaps, is the ability to use IT to achieve these goals. Just as technology has allowed us to overcome other barriers, IT can be used to globalize our institutions.

Pedagogically, cross-cultural experiences enhance the ability of students to see and “resee.” What we see, what we can see, depends to a significant degree on what we have learned to think about, to look for, and to expect. This, in turn, comes from our experience and culture. IT makes it possible for us to expand our ability to see our surroundings, our experience, and our cultural base. For example, there are numerous classes being taught with students in two or more countries. Sometimes e-mail and chat rooms provide most of the interaction. In other cases, compressed video allows stu-
...derived from the fact that there are so many ways to interact. Irrespective of the technology chosen, the cross-cultural exchange helps learners enrich their understanding of different traditions and of the ways other societies work.

An increasing number of MBA programs are adding a global component, exposing students to other cultures and enabling students to see the world around them from new perspectives. Many programs alternate brief periods in different countries with extended online learning experiences. Teams are composed of individuals from different cultures. Working closely together to solve cases, learners come to realize that doing business in the United States differs from doing business in Japan or in Mexico or in Kenya. These global programs illustrate the impact of distributed learning.

One of the ACE recommendations states that education must become truly international, not simply European. In the United States, higher education institutions confer ten times as many degrees in German as in Chinese, graduate eighteen times as many French-speakers as Japanese-speakers, and count nearly five hundred graduates fluent in Spanish for every one fluent in Arabic. The fault does not rest entirely with the colleges and universities. Not all institutions can find instructors for Japanese, Chinese, or Farsi. However, IT does allow colleges and universities to share courses and to enrich programs with authentic examples.

The ACE report also encourages the understanding of at least one other culture, citing the importance of intercultural competence. There are any number of ways this can be accomplished—both with and without technology. But technology can play a critical role here. With the financial sacrifice that education represents for many students, spending a summer abroad is often unrealistic. Much can be accomplished through synchronous and asynchronous communication, ranging from telecommunication links with other countries to international chat rooms.

Graduates also need an understanding of global systems such as the international economy or the interactions among environmental and public health systems. Every day, these global systems affect the quality of life as exchange rates rise and lower the price of goods and as pollution and public health problems transcend national boundaries. IT can help higher education develop problem-focused programs oriented around situations in the real world. Computer-based simulations allow students to explore these problems by speeding up or slowing down time and manipulating other variables.

Unfortunately, attitudes measured in a 1997 Carnegie Foundation study indicate that U.S. higher education is not committed to globalization. In the study, only half of U.S. faculty feel that connections with scholars in other countries are very important. More than 90 percent of faculty in the other thirteen countries surveyed believe that a scholar must read books and journals published abroad to keep up with scholarly development. Only 62 percent of U.S. faculty agreed. Americans also travel abroad for research and study less frequently than do scholars from other countries. Finally, the study revealed that U.S. faculty are similarly unenthusiastic about internationalizing the curriculum.  

In addition, there is a negative side to globalization. Pierre S. Pettigrew, Canadian minister for international trade, describes globalization as a force that ignores political borders and merges economic spaces, creating a horizontal marketplace. This economic power is gradually replacing the power of the state and of politics. For countries with the right skill sets and social organization, globalization is an opportunity. Mainland China, with 1.3 billion people, is an example. The economy is growing at 8 percent per year because the population has the necessary skills. But for those people who lack skills and who live in chaotic social environments (e.g., central Africa), globalization accelerates declines already long under way.

Thus the great danger associated with globalization is exclusion. In the past, people might have been exploited, but they still had a place on the social ladder. The exploited could organize themselves and make demands because their labor was generally required. Exclusion is different. In this situation, wealth can be generated without those excluded. With no social relationship to fall back on, those who are excluded become increasingly isolated from mainstream society.

In a global environment, education becomes of supreme importance, since it is the only tool that fights exclusion. Fortunately, today’s IT makes it possible to bring education to more people than ever before. This will not happen without leadership, but such leaders can come from many sources, including those involved with IT. The vision and passion of technologists and pioneering faculty led the way for an IT revolution on our campuses. The same might be true for globalization.

The world is getting smaller, thanks in large part to IT. Using that same technology, we have the opportunity to broaden our horizons—to see farther—and benefit more people than ever before. Realizing such opportunity hinges on creating true coalitions between academics and technologists and between educators and statesmen. Will U.S. higher education step up to the challenge?

Notes

Diana Oblinger is a Senior Fellow with the EDUCAUSE Center for Applied Research (ECAR) and is Professor of the Practice at the Kenan-Flagler Business School at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.