From Ptolemy to Copernicus: Internationalizing the University of Virginia

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Abstract
Parochial or ‘isolationist’ universities, particularly in the United States, will be challenged by this stimulating case study of internationalisation within the University of Virginia. The author argues that “a university that continues to rely on the attractiveness of its ivy will eventually appeal only to garden clubs”. He applies the paradigm ‘leap’ from Ptolemaic to Copernican world views to the world of universities in the new millennium. In particular, he applies this to the implementation of ‘Virginia 2020’ and the University’s ‘four fingers and a thumb’ strategy towards international development. To those less convinced, he provides a warning: “.....because the United States has become the economic, political and military leader in the post-Cold War world, the Ptolemaic concept is particularly tempting to us. Talking among ourselves, globalisation frequently slides into global Americanization”.

The Copernican Leap

First we should pay our respects to Ptolemy. He was no fool. CLAUDIUS PTOLEMAEUS (fl. AD 127-145, Alexandria) was known as “The Great Astronomer” for almost as long as Aristotle was known as “The Philosopher.” His fame rested on his comprehensive synthesis of Greek astronomy, including his mathematical proof that the earth did not move and therefore the earth was the center of the universe. The complications that this thesis caused for predicting the apparently erratic movement of the planets were solved by an ingenious arrangement of epicycles – circular orbits within circular orbits – which could be tinkered with and added to for greater accuracy.

Centuries of teachers have planted their foot on Ptolemy’s name in order to hold high the transcendent credibility of science. But it is not because his error was obvious that Ptolemy has become synonymous with silly, outdated thinking. Quite the opposite. We all live in self-centered universes, and he provides the cosmology for this perceptual reality. Copernicus and his more outspoken successor Galileo were hard to accept because of their challenge to the natural way of viewing the universe, namely, viewing it from where we stand. The Copernican revolution took a universe that was complicated but cozy and made it into one of severe simplicity in which we were in orbit. It was profoundly unsettling, but the indisputable objective accuracy of the new, non-centric cosmology made it a foundation stone of the modern world.

Cosmology aside, however, universities, especially American universities, and certainly the University of Virginia tend to be Ptolemaic in their relationship to
the rest of the world. No one denies the existence of the world or its importance, but it exists out there, circling the edge of the "really real." The world periphery of our self-centered perspective is becoming increasingly active and interactive, requiring a great deal of ad hoc crisis management and occasionally stimulating opportunistic visions. Just as with Ptolemy's epicycles, dealing with the world out there leads to an endless proliferation of complexities. The "academic world" is Copernican in theory and from a distance, but its practical center of gravity tends to be in each institution.

This was not always the case for American universities in general or for the University of Virginia. As befitted a former colony, American higher education started with the assumption that it had a special role but one that existed in the orbit of European academic culture. I have heard that Harvard once offered Galileo a job. Certainly Thomas Jefferson, the founder of the University of Virginia, turned to Europe as a model and source of talent. Even though no American was more convinced of the originality of his endeavors, Jefferson saw his academic innovation, like the rest of the American experiment, as an active part of an international context. The University of Virginia was the first state-funded citizen university in the world, but Jefferson sought faculty in England, stonemasons in Italy, and the University was built by non-citizens from Africa.

As the United States prospered and matured culturally, the distance from European models and contacts gradually became greater. By the twentieth century the American academic world had become so vast that the rest of the world was edged beyond the pale of routine contact. To be sure, individual scholarly contact was encouraged, especially through the Fulbright Program, and the rest of the world became an object of organized study as area studies programs proliferated. But for Americans, the domestic academic scene was in living color, while the rest of the world was at best in black and white.

Since the end of the Cold War there are mixed signals concerning internationalization. On the negative side, state funding for international education has been slashed, and foundations are becoming more diffident about supporting area studies programs. There is also a strong tendency in social science disciplines to devalue research that requires in-depth area knowledge.

On the positive side, the information and communications revolutions have removed physical barriers to contact and collaboration, and this has led to a surge of American students in study abroad programs. Also international students are an increasingly significant segment of the graduate student population. As a result, leading universities have moved toward incorporating international activities into the basic structure of their programs and their leadership. In the past ten years many American universities have added a person responsible for international activities to their senior leadership,
usually a vice provost. So despite a certain intellectual malaise in globally-oriented research, the pace-setters among American universities are achieving unprecedented levels of international interaction.

A Copernican leap in international activities requires more than an increase in the quantity of international activities. The real challenge for American universities is both an intellectual and a moral one. We must act as if we are part of a larger reality, rather than simply addressing a new external reality. To some extent this appears to be simply a question of attitudes: the facts and the rationale for further internationalization remain the same from either perspective. This is actually not unusual in a paradigm shift: both Ptolemy and Copernicus could predict the same eclipse. And precisely because the United States has become the economic, political and military leader in the post-Cold War world, the Ptolemaic concept is particularly tempting to us. Talking among ourselves, globalization frequently elides into global Americanization.

The University of Virginia’s International Activities Planning Commission

As in most American universities, international activities at the University of Virginia have expanded over the past twenty years because of uncoordinated initiatives of faculty and students. These efforts have been welcome in principle by the University, but because they have occurred on the periphery of its vision and interests, the necessary infrastructure has not kept pace, and the individual entrepreneur within the University bears most of the trouble and risk of innovation. Such a situation inevitably reaches the attention of university leadership, but through the back door of being the source of many petty but acute crises. This typically leads to reluctant and stingy Band-Aid budgeting rather than strategic rethinking.

Fortunately, in 1998 the University of Virginia decided to embark on a major effort of strategic planning and development, and the area of international activities was one of the four targets set for concentrated progress across the University of the next twenty years. The entire program is called “Virginia 2020” because in the year 2020 the University will begin its third century.

The task of planning was entrusted to the International Activities Planning Commission (IAPC), twenty-five members well known for their international activities and drawn from across the University. Establishing the Commission proved to be much better than relying simply on to-down administrative planning because the synergy of people from across different fields meeting to discuss a common interest has produced many new ideas that may result in innovative long term directions and programs. The IAPC had been meeting monthly since January 1999, and we are about to issue our final report.
Four Fingers and a Thumb

One of the most challenging tasks in organizing the Commission was figuring out how to structure its activities. International activities are by their nature diffused throughout a university. In the ideal environment, each student and faculty member would be offered attractive international activities through the University, but they would still remain free to make their choices, and would be encouraged to innovate. Therefore, the primary task of the University in this area is to encourage and co-ordinate, not to restructure and regulate.

The necessary diffuseness of international activities touches directly on strategic planning. If long term planning concentrated on one or two aspects of international activities, say, study abroad or setting up a vice provost, then other important areas would not even be present on the international radar screen of the University. Of course, eventually priorities will have to be set and some things will be done before others, but priorities should not be predetermined by a partial view of the whole picture. So the first task of planning is to specify a comprehensive set of categories that includes all international activities.

We came up with five broad categories of international activities, four substantive and one organizational. The substantive categories are:

1. Students and faculty abroad
2. Internationalization of the curriculum
3. Treatment of international students and scholars
4. International liaisons

These correspond to the “fingers” to be used to encourage and coordinate international activities. The “thumb,” that which holds the concrete tasks together, is the appropriate organization of international activities at the University. In some respects the organizational thumb is most important, but only because it is necessary in order for the concrete tasks to be organized and facilitated.

Although the four tasks can be described separately and the International Activities Planning Commission was organized into corresponding task groups, it is clear that their integration adds a new dimension of quality and stimulation to the University’s mission. For instance, students considering study abroad are better prepared if the curriculum is designed with their needs in mind, and when they return the curriculum should be able to incorporate their new experiences and competencies. Likewise, the University’s capacity to treat well international students and scholars is essential for the reciprocity required in most international liaisons. Each of the concrete tasks includes routine matters as well as opportunities for unique programs. For instance, study abroad clearly requires adequate
staffing in the study abroad program office, but we are also proposing fifth year post graduate programs that will be quite novel.

**Copernican Inclusiveness**

The overall program suggested by the Commission attempts to respond to a more Copernican view of international activities by proposing to add an international dimension to the University of Virginia that will touch the full range of its operations.

Beyond this general attempt at internationalization, however, a special characteristic of some of our most innovative proposals is that they are designed to be internationally inclusive from the ground up. I will describe one of these, the International Institute of American Studies (IIAS).

The IIAS is designed to be inclusive and collaborative along several dimensions. First, it will be multi-disciplinary, and it will be based on the cooperation of various departments and centers at the University of Virginia. It will avoid duplicating existing programs, but it will coordinate them in a specific direction and supplement them. Typically the first thing built in a new structure within a university are its walls; we will try to break that pattern.

More importantly from an international perspective, we hope to collaborate with programs in American Studies throughout the world in the design and operation of the IIAS. Internationally the IIAS should be an open forum for American Studies rather than one more separate organization. We hope to begin with an international planning conference, incorporate internet capacities for group communications, information archiving, and broadcast of relevant programs, and serve as an American pied à terre for international students and scholars in this field.

We think that a truly international forum for American Studies is important for America’s self-understanding. The United States exists in a global environment, but it can only see its role from the inside out. A complete understanding of the United States cannot be achieved from simply an intense domestic study. It requires the external perspectives of the rest of the world in order to complete the picture.

**Identity and Development**

Universities are not butterflies, and so it would be hopelessly idealistic to expect fundamental changes to occur overnight. Viewing international activities as peripheral may be a mistake, but it is also a habit, and those with the habit are reluctant to view it as a mistake. Nevertheless, a reorientation
that expands the horizons of a university changes its mind and therefore its identity.

In the case of the University of Virginia, this process can be accelerated by the prospect of finding new sources of funding for international projects. Institutional identity is not just a matter of internal concern, it is also the basis of the persona that the University presents to the outside world. An international dimension can make a university more progressive and polyvalent in its external relations. To the extent that continued development depends on external funding, therefore, a new international “look” is an advantage. A university that continues to rely only on the attractiveness of its ivy will eventually appeal only to garden clubs. Moreover, development initiatives that are targeted at international projects do not compete directly with traditional sources of support but rather expand the university’s development opportunities. In general, therefore, the University’s interest in development should help counterbalance the internal inertia of routine, the trench warfare of budgetary politics, and lack of imagination.

But it should be noted that development has its own Ptolemaic problems. International opportunities are first seen as opportunities “out there,” on the edge. This is the chance to develop international alumni associations and to target international foundations and businesses. Indeed, an international dimension is necessary to such endeavors, and it does take previously unexplored territory off the edge of the known (American) world and turn it into a frontier for exploration. But the implicit idea is that international activities add a new growth ring to the outside of the university, not that the internal identity or general direction of growth is affected.

If, instead of taking an international dimension as a new asset, development would put on international lenses and look about, new possibilities would emerge in familiar territory. The majority of today’s newly successful entrepreneurs know that their business is global, and they can appreciate what an international university can contribute to their business and societal environment. A business or foundation located around the corner in Charlottesville might be more interested in housing for international scholars or a joint medical program in Brazil than in the football team.

And speaking of football, in the early 1990s the University of Virginia soccer team was the US national champion for four years in a row. The team got to meet President Clinton, but was there a concerted effort to develop the University’s international profile on the basis of this sports achievement? Were concerted efforts made to bring in the foreign media? If the (American) football team had a comparable achievement, would it have had an effect on development? Was an opportunity lost because — without international lenses — it could not be perceived?
An appeal to the raw and competitive self-interest of a university may seem inappropriate for such an exalted and idealistic topic as educational internationalization. But the transformation of identity is more than an ethical imperative. An institution becomes different, and even its selfish actions are shifted to a different concept of self. Globalization is not the dissolution of individual identity in the Great Ocean of the All, but rather an adjustment of perspective to the fact that the familiar horizons once set by the limits of communication and information no longer exist.

To acknowledge that one is located in an interactive and global environment does challenge convenient and reassuring assumptions about one's centrality to the universe. Copernicus was too prudent to raise this challenge, and Galileo’s imprudence got him into trouble with the Inquisition. But facts are facts. The facts of the new millennium include a revolution in knowledge processes that is intrinsically global. Universities have three choices. They may attempt to lead this change; they may follow along behind, complaining about the pace; or they may righteously resist, in the name of received values. think we can guess which one Thomas Jefferson would have chosen.