

Maximizing Human Capital by Developing Multicultural Competence

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Multicultural competence, defined as an understanding of international business and social relations plus the attitudes, skills, and special knowledge necessary to apply it, is identified as an emerging component of human capital in the global economy. This article documents the growing demand for multicultural competence, describes the course content and advisor activities that have been recommended to develop this capacity, and comments on the limits and inherent dangers of providing multicultural exposure to everyone. The article also identifies new roles, such as that of a "culture broker," which characterize the global economy. Academic advisors are urged to help students maximize their human capital by adding multicultural competence skills as part of their formal education.

In a recent article in the *NACADA Journal*, I advocated a human capital approach to academic advising (Shaffer, 1997). Based on the distinction between earning a credential and getting a good education, I recommended that students be encouraged to make academic decisions, from choosing a major to investing time in cocurricular activities, by maximizing the development of their human capital. Following conventional economic analysis, I summarized investment in human capital development into five distinct types: formal education, adult education, on-the-job training, health, and geographic mobility. The following expands the focus of human capital to the emerging concept of multicultural competence.

The Demand for Multicultural Competence

In the late 1990s, the U.S. was struggling to come to grips with cultural and ethnic diversity at home and the global economy abroad. While the 20-year, often acrimonious, debates over multicultural diversity in education were typically framed in terms of social equity within the U.S. (Ezeamii, 1996; Gould, 1995; San Juan, Jr., 1994; Schuman & Olufs, 1995), at the dawn of the millennium, interest in multicultural diversity within business and industry is directed to the global competitiveness of American-based firms. Responding to a query by the College Placement Council, the RAND Corporation conducted a study designed to answer fundamental questions concerning the implications of globalism on U.S. workforce

preparation (Bikson & Law, 1994). The investigators interviewed 350 professionals from business, industry, and postsecondary institutions in four urban American settings: New York City; Los Angeles; Chicago; and the Texas triangle of Houston, Austin, and Dallas. All respondents were chosen for their central roles in setting policy concerning the development (in the case of education) or the recruitment (in the case of business and industry) of new career candidates.

A critical question posed by the study concerned the demand for specific skills among recruits to business and industry: What do firms competing in a global marketplace look for in potential hires? Some of the answers were familiar statements of human capital: domain knowledge relevant to an entry-level vacancy, generic skills for the long run (such as communication, leadership, and ability to learn), and work experience. While domain-specific skills have been considered a necessity for entry-level positions, rapid domain-skills obsolescence was forcing employers to look beyond the immediate fit and give preference to recruits with potential for life-long learning. They expressed a need for employees who can take increasing responsibilities and grow into new positions. Work experience, even if it is not in the candidates' chosen career paths, was also seen as an important barometer of important intangible qualities such as reliability and willingness to work. However, a new requirement was also voiced by the respondents: the need for multicultural competence.

The RAND study noted that corporations were becoming more cognizant of the need for employees who have complete understanding of the global economy—whose outlook had shifted from a U.S. view to a global consciousness—and the abilities to translate that vision into business know-how in operations abroad. Realizing that they were hearing respondents verbalize an emerging conception of a specialized, sought-after aptitude, the researchers developed a working definition of this quality. They eventually settled on the following definition: multicultural (or cross-cultural) competence is "an internationalized understanding plus the attitudes, skills, and domain knowledge needed to apply it effectively in a given context" (Bikson, 1996, p. 15). Respondents articulated a need for employees

with multicultural competence qualities that include openness to the values of non-American persons or organizations; basic knowledge about foreign countries, including their ethnic groups, history, and culture; ability to work effectively in a variety of work settings; and foreign language fluency. While many respondents indicated that they were describing a fundamental set of attitudes (avoiding ethnocentric judgments and exhibiting tolerance for unfamiliar business practices), others emphasized that they were equally concerned with more tangible cognitive resources such as knowledge of the geography and political systems of a foreign country. While the RAND study participants expressed concerns about the ability of U.S. colleges and universities to provide candidates with domain-specific skills, generic abilities, and work experience needed for the global workforce, they were especially concerned with the mismatch between the human capital of graduates and the demand for multicultural competence.

Indeed, the RAND study found an inconsistency between how academic institutions and international corporations value multicultural competence: colleges and universities give little attention to the international dimensions of academic majors. Curricula in the 1990s did not emphasize subjects such as world history, geography, comparative politics, and foreign languages. In addition, opportunities for exposing students to people from alternative cultures were ignored. The picture of higher education in America and other parts of the world is striking: U.S. graduates seem parochial in their attitudes compared to graduates from other countries. The result strongly affects the human capital of American graduates: companies pursuing international business strategies are not confident that U.S. higher education can provide for their human resource needs. As one executive told the RAND investigators, "Overseas we recruit people to work anywhere in the world. In North America we recruit people to work in the home country" (Bikson, 1996, p. 17).

In the long run, college and university responses to study results like that reported by RAND will focus on general education and program-of-study curricula changes. Some responses will be small in scale, such as attempts to create new courses that focus on multicultural competence development (Garcia, 1995; Smith & Steward, 1995). Other undertakings will be more encompassing to encourage multiculturalism dissemination throughout the curriculum (Gillette & Boyle-Baise, 1996; Goldstein, 1995; Gould,

1995; LaFromboise & Foster, 1992; Main, 1989; Sanders, 1980). But in the short run, academic advisors who take a developmental approach can help students maximize their human capital and create multicultural competence from the transferable skills currently offered in postsecondary curricula.

The Development of Multicultural Competence

In addition to health status and geographic mobility, the concept of human capital includes the skills and special knowledge necessary to make a worker productive in a particular occupation (Shaffer, 1997). Until an advisor has a formal curriculum to suggest to students, he or she must discover which extant courses can help students acquire multicultural competence.

Skills

Anthropologist Mikel Hogan Garcia (1995) has developed an explicit *Multicultural Diversity Training* approach that operationalizes multicultural competence as four interrelated skills:

1. understanding culture as it operates on different social levels;
2. understanding common barriers to effective communication and relationships;
3. developing personal competencies, dialogue, and recovery skills for effective communication and relationship building; and
4. developing strategies for problem solving and for transforming an organization into a multicultural organization.

To understand a culture on multiple levels, students must recognize the impact of culture on their own thoughts and behaviors. This cultural awareness is a necessary, but not sufficient, basis for working effectively with others from non-American backgrounds (Harris, 1996). However, self-exploration exercises are particularly important for Anglos whose participation in a culture defined as "mainstream" encourages them to ignore cultural influences on their behaviors. Further, belief in the melting pot character of American society encourages many individuals to minimize cultural diversity concerns (Lynch & Hanson, 1992).

Many strategies exist for promoting cultural self-awareness. Garcia (1995) describes activities such as role play where students act out behaviors

that violate the patterns of their culture and then discuss their performances. He also suggests that students produce examples of behavior patterns from their personal (family) culture, subculture (such as African American), organizational or school culture, and mainstream U.S. society. In addition, students could write multicultural autobiographies or create dialogue journals (Gillette & Boyle-Baise, 1996). In all such exercises, the focus should be on developing awareness of the influence of one's own culture—a behavior factor often ignored.

To identify common barriers to effective communication and productive interpersonal relationships, Garcia (1995) recommends covering differences in language and nonverbal behavior, preconceptions and stereotypes of out-groups, judgments about the character or motives of out-group members, and the stress resulting from the discord sometimes felt when dealing with persons from unfamiliar cultures. Business publications are full of stories about failed negotiations caused from the misunderstanding of a foreign language (Main, 1989; Teitelbaum, 1989); gaffes resulting from ignorance of nonverbal behaviors, such as gestures, that are significant to non-American cultures (Ekman, Freisen, & Bear, 1984; Katayama, 1989; Pfeiffer, 1988; Valentine, 1989); and misjudgments based on preconceptions or cultural stereotypes (Slate, 1993). Garcia employs case studies as a vehicle for learning to recognize and avoid these communication problems.

Personal competencies that Garcia (1995) identified as important for persons working in intercultural settings include being nonjudgmental, flexible, and resourceful; listening carefully, observing attentively, assuming complexity, tolerating ambiguity, exhibiting patience, showing respect, displaying empathy, and maintaining a sense of humor. His suggested approach to multicultural competency development is to train individuals to engage in fruitful dialogue with others and to recover from misunderstandings that result in conflict.

To transform companies into multicultural organizations, action plans for problem solving are important. In both business and education, these strategy skills have been highlighted as a part of good customer service (Hovland, Dickeson, & Holtkamp, 1996). Students who serve as interns or participate in service-learning programs will be most likely to benefit from hands-on organizational planning and problem solving.

Some colleges or universities may have spe-

cific courses that address one or more multicultural competence skills, such as the class in intercultural business communication described by Smith and Steward (1995). More often than not, an academic advisor must help students identify multicultural diversity courses from the general education curriculum. Garcia (1995) recommends instruction that features active learning strategies: present conceptual information as background for each skill, then encourage experiential learning activities related to interpersonal behaviors (such as role play), followed by discussions intended to provoke self-reflection. Garcia also suggests conversations about case studies as a valuable learning strategy. Students will find that courses with comparable pedagogical designs will be very helpful in developing multicultural competence. Relevant courses can be found in a wide variety of departments: cultural anthropology, sociology, social work, cross-cultural and social psychology, communications studies, ethnic studies, womens' studies, counselor education, and political science.

In addition, an advisor can talk with advisees about the enriching opportunities of study abroad. Culture shock allows students immersed in foreign countries to become mindful of society's role in shaping behavior and to think about their home cultures as if they were not citizens of the country (Lawson & Tubbs, 1996). But business leaders who were interviewed for the RAND study were often critical of U.S. higher education—especially colleges and universities located in large, urban areas—for failing to capitalize on learning opportunities available in diverse local neighborhoods and campuses (Bikson, 1996). While study abroad programs have much to offer students who want to develop multicultural competence, in most instances living away from home is unnecessary.

Special Knowledge

In preparing for multicultural competence, a student should choose to study a region—Africa, Asia, Europe, the Pacific Rim, South America, and so forth. The student should then select courses in geography, foreign language, history, and culture studies concerning the peoples who live and work in that area. While many students will have no immediate basis for choosing a part of the world, they can be encouraged to use the campus career development center to find out where previous graduates have found demand for their skills or services. Even if a student wishes to work only in the U.S., growing domestic diversity means that graduates will work with clients who

will be best understood by looking at the cultures of their regions of origin (Harris, 1996; Wilcox, 1991).

The centerpiece of special knowledge required for multicultural competence is geography—a subject in which U.S. students are notoriously poor (Hermann, 1995; Salter, 1991). One study of 300 college students found that many, even those who were otherwise academically excellent, were woefully ignorant of geographic knowledge, including the location of countries and cities, knowledge of cultures, and the ability to read maps (Eve, Price, & Counts, 1994). Students can invest in their human capital by taking one or more geography courses, either in fulfillment of general education requirements or from among their free electives. To maximize the effectiveness of these courses, they should be chosen in concert with foreign language and other classes that provide information about specifically chosen cultures.

After selecting a geographic region, the student will be able to readily identify courses in foreign language, history, and culture studies that complement the geography classes in multicultural competence development. At West Chester University, students required to take foreign language as part of their general education requirements already have such complementary choices spelled out as Foreign Language Culture Cluster courses (Shaffer, 1997). Advisors should know that a consensus has not yet developed concerning the necessity of foreign language fluency in developing multicultural competence (Bikson, 1996). English has been established for some time as the language of international commerce, and most business negotiations can be conducted in English (Katayama, 1989; Making yourself understood abroad, 1985; Teitelbaum, 1989). In the emerging literature on multicultural diversity, the emphasis has not been on language obstacles as much as cultural barriers to effective communication. In his training program, Garcia lists poor verbal communication as only one of five common personal or interpersonal hindrances to effective communication and relationships. On the other hand, many experienced business leaders make a strong plea for learning a second language (Main, 1989; Slate, 1993; Teitelbaum, 1989) because it signals respect for the non-English speaker, who often concedes a negotiation advantage to English-speakers (Making yourself understood abroad, 1985). In addition, English speakers are often dependent upon translators, and the study of a foreign language (though it does not produce

fluency in that language) can facilitate understanding of a translator's role and appreciation of cultural nuances expressed in idiomatic speech (Harris, 1996; Lynch & Hanson, 1992). I recommend that academic advisors explain the human capital value of foreign language fluency in general (Shaffer, 1997), but I do not suggest that they push reluctant students to enroll in more advanced language courses.

An emerging role in international affairs is the role of a *culture broker*, a person who is familiar with two cultures and fluent in two (or more languages) and can facilitate negotiations between members of two different cultural groups (Dennis, 1994). Since demographic trends in the U.S. predict a great increase in diverse students and workers in the next decade (Gardner, 1996; Harris, 1996; LaFromboise & Foster, 1992; Pascarella, Edison, Nora, Hagedorn, & Terenzini, 1996), academic advisors will be working with more and more students who will have second language skills as well as familiarity with one or more ethnic, racial, or national group. While it is certainly possible for motivated Anglo students to develop the skills and special knowledge to become a culture broker, it will be much easier for non-Anglo students to use their life experiences to reach that same goal. Advisors should be prepared to explain the unique human capital culture brokers provide the global economy and to help students make the decisions necessary to qualify for such opportunities.

Adult Education and On-the-job Training

The changing economy, spurred in part by globalism, has become an environment in which no special knowledge or set of skills will be sufficient for a lifetime of success in the labor market. The new economy requires its participants to be lifelong learners (Shaffer, 1997). Students will be required to regularly upgrade their knowledge and skills as a condition of continued employment. The same perpetual-learning principle applies to multicultural competence. Just as technical skills change and knowledge accumulates, cultures evolve. No combination of experiences or undergraduate courses will be sufficient for a graduate to be forever fully competent. She or he must keep up with developments in relevant regions to maintain currency with any culture.

Two types of investment in human capital—on-the-job training and adult education—are vehicles for continuing development in multicultural competence. The main practical difference between the two for most students is who foots

the bill: employers invest in on-the-job training for their workers while employees typically pay for adult education courses. Since employers tend to invest money in on-the-job training programs only for workers with college degrees and not for semi-skilled or unskilled labor (Hodson, Hooks, & Rieble, 1994), I believe that corporations will probably pay for college-educated employees to participate in ongoing multicultural competence training while other employees will have to seek it out and pay for it on their own (Valentine, 1989). To meet expectations of employers hiring at the entry level, students must develop their multicultural competence as undergraduates. Because the current labor market allocates training slots in lieu of finite skills training (Shaffer, 1997; Thurow, 1980), graduates will be increasingly screened for their potential to become productive contributors in international markets. Business leaders currently think of multicultural competence as a desirable skill for an entry-level position, but advisors and students should envision a time when multicultural competence skills will become a minimum standard for employment (Bikson, 1996).

The Limits of Multicultural Competence

Dangers exist on the path to developing multicultural competence. The first hazard is a kind of boomerang effect: Some students who have ethnocentric viewpoints and stereotypic beliefs will have their impressions reinforced through superficial exposure to other cultures. cursory instruction about different cultural beliefs, norms, and activities can simply serve to marginalize the peoples being described. For example, when courses present the history or culture of foreign countries merely as information to be memorized, students may unwittingly conclude that differences between themselves and the groups they have studied are great (or that differences among members of those groups are small), when the truth actually may be the reverse. Magnifying out-group differences from an in-group perspective ("they are not like us") and minimizing variability among members of an out-group ("they are all alike") can lead to stereotyping rather than the multicultural understanding intended by the courses (Goldstein, 1995). In addition, MacDonald and Sperry (1995) reported that the impact of a college education course entitled "Education in a Multicultural Society" on students' ethnocentrism depended upon students' predispositions to tolerate ambiguity. Students who entered the course with high levels of ethno-

centrism—but also high tolerance of ambiguity—became less ethnocentric over the course of a semester. However, if students were intolerant of ambiguity, the results were quite different: Students with high levels of initial ethnocentrism remained nationalistic after the course, while students with low initial levels of ethnocentrism actually became more sectarian after taking the course. The caveat for academic advisors is that the effect of exposing students to information about other peoples and their cultures is dependent upon the instructors' pedagogical approaches as well as the students' predispositions. Data presentation about foreign peoples does not automatically result in greater student understanding, appreciation, or acceptance of other cultures.

A second problem is associated with overstating the likely outcomes of multicultural competence training. When understood in the context of the national debates concerning multiculturalism, competence is a much more limited goal than the development of a true multicultural perspective (Gould, 1995). Academics will be quick to note that the openly utilitarian motives associated with multicultural competence can encourage students to be satisfied with a very limited sense of ethnorelativism: They know just enough about other peoples and their cultures to be successful in international trade; however, they do not develop the political will to support efforts for social equity in global (or local) politics or economies. The proposed agenda for multicultural competence is small compared to an ambitious multiculturalism policy.

Despite the limitations of the multicultural competence idea, the term adequately refers to the special knowledge and interrelated skills that will become increasingly important to the development of students' human capital. Academic advisors need not wait for multicultural program development; raw materials for drawing together a meaningful set of courses that provide multicultural skills and knowledge are plentiful on every U.S. college or university campus. Advisors and students can work together immediately to start the lifelong process of multicultural competence.

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