Global learning focuses on defining the nature of global problems and determining learning processes that would help people to develop solutions. The term global learning contains a deliberate double meaning, intending to convey learning as a global process that must include all sectors of society, as well as a sense of learning to think globally in an increasingly interconnected world.

Global learning means:

- Students are engaging in self-reflection on their personal and emerging professional roles.
- Students are working across cultural, disciplinary, and other differences.
- Students are drawing on real-world perspectives beyond their own to understand and analyze situations and challenges.
- Students are collaborating to address real-world problems that transcend borders.

Global learning outcomes:

- Understand the interconnectedness of local, global, and intercultural issues, trends, and systems
- Explore multiple dimensions of DEI worldwide, including language, culture, and identity
- Conduct a multiperspective analysis of complex issues that transcend borders
- Engage in appropriate and effective interactions across cultures
- Take action for collective well-being and sustainable development
- Learn more: Check out AAC&U’s Global Learning Value Rubric at https://www.aacu.org/value/rubrics/global-learning

Characteristics of diversity, equity, and inclusion:

- Increasing diversity
- Increasing perspectives
- Creating a culture of belonging
- Addressing institutional and societal racism, ethnic, cultural, ability, gender, language, religious, and socioeconomic status inequities and systemic disparities
- Developing a culture ripe for contribution by all
- Committing to removing systemic barriers

What does global learning look like in practice?

Global learning can take place at home, abroad, in person, or online. It should involve the curriculum and the cocurriculum, enabling students to make connections among ideas, issues, and experiences to transfer their learning to new situations, inside and outside the classroom. As such, global learning can be as varied as the following:

- Health care: In our course on challenges in health care, students work in interdisciplinary teams to research the social determinants of health in a local underserved neighborhood. Students then design culturally appropriate health plans for families.
- Inclusion: In a study abroad course on inclusion and recreation services taking place in Italy and France, students compare Italian and French disability laws and learn about the challenges of accessing buildings, roads, and public transportation.
- Religion: In a course about fantasy and collaborative online international learning, US students and Colombian students examine how literary fantasy uses religious symbolism to create compelling characters in pursuit of universal truths.
- Social change: As part of the Millennium Fellowship, a global leadership program, students enact social change related to one of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, working on a self-designed project to reduce food waste on their campuses.

Ways DEI and global learning can intersect

The fields of global learning and DEI share fundamental values, deep commitments to inclusion and social justice, and an abhorrence of discrimination. Learning outcomes of both include the importance of critical reflection, action that leads to a positive impact in communities, and integration of diverse perspectives. Both aim to ensure the representation of and create a sense of belonging for all community members.

How do students conceive of global learning and DEI?

Students associate global learning with learning that is woven into the curriculum and cocurriculum, while they perceive DEI to be tied to the climate of the institution. Students use phrases such as “understanding different perspectives and viewpoints” and “awareness of global issues” to describe global learning. They use phrases such as “inclusive of all students,” “sense of belonging,” and “empowerment” to talk about DEI.

How do students connect the fields?

Students perceive global learning and DEI as intricately connected, each essential to the other. Students believe that boosting global learning and DEI skills will help them personally, professionally, and as responsible, active citizens. They use phrases such as “We’ve been going over the idea of design justice in minority communities and how current events around the world affect DEI.”

Student advice on integrating DEI and global learning

Hire more faculty and advisors who look like students. “Priority hiring faculty with diverse backgrounds and perspectives,” one student said. Provide professional development training to faculty. “All faculty would benefit from a mandatory business cultural workshop,” said a student. Ensure everyone at the institution learns the language of DEI and global learning to avoid misunderstandings and to navigate spaces on and off campus. Provide a physical space where everyone can feel welcome—a “cozy place, not just for business purposes,” said a student.

Over the past twenty years, higher education leaders, faculty, and staff have held disconnected conversations around the intersection and alignment of global learning and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts on college and university campuses. These discussions became more urgent in the wake of the 2020 summer of racial reckoning that emerged from global protests over the separate deaths of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, and Breonna Taylor. Many higher education institutions recognize that global learning can and must better address DEI challenges; the challenge is in how to act.

In 2021, we conducted a multi-institutional qualitative study to get students’ perspectives on the meaning, challenges, and possible interactions of global learning and DEI. We conducted one-hour interviews with focus groups of four to ten diverse students from six institutions across the United States, followed by a second one-hour focus group interview with five students from three of the universities. We identified the participating campuses based on a search for global learning and DEI on institutions’ websites, a review of institutional education conference sessions that mentioned DEI and global learning, and contact with participants from the eight institutions that took part in the American Council on Education’s 2012–15 At Home in the World initiative, which sought to connect campus internationalization efforts with diversity and multicultural education work.

Overall, we found that students are acutely aware of and hold opinions about the meaning of global learning and DEI, the amount of effort that their institutions are making to advance and integrate both fields, and the results of these advances. Students think deeply about global learning and DEI, and their institutions would do well to take seriously their suggestions for moving campuses toward greater equity inclusion, and belonging.