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Prior to joining ACCT, Robin led programs and global initiatives at the American Council on Education, where her portfolio focused on institutional transformation, higher education leadership development, global engagement, and equity and inclusion.

Previously, Robin worked in international education and academic affairs at the University of Minnesota and the Institute of International Education. She has also served as a consultant to a number of organizations in the international and higher education fields, and is a member of the National Academy for International Education.

Robin holds a bachelor's degree in East Asian Studies from Princeton University, and an MBA and PhD in higher education administration from Boston College.

European Higher Education Cooperation in a Global Context

Higher Education Cooperation 2023: US Trends, Challenges, and Implications for Engagement

Around the world, the last few years have been a roller coaster ride for higher education internationalisation and global engagement. Though challenges certainly remain and we are all still getting our bearings, overall, there seems to be a sense of forward movement. I recently attended a meeting of European Fulbright programme directors, and while there was undoubtedly post-pandemic fatigue, overall the tone was one of optimism, energy, and pride for the scrappy creativity and innovation that have emerged during the pandemic and in spite of significant regional and geopolitical conflict and challenges.

The atmosphere is similar in the US. Recent international education conferences have been well attended, and the commitment to resuming and furthering the important work of connecting students and faculty with counterparts around the world is strong. Data from the American Council on Education's 2022 [Mapping Internationalization on US Campuses](#) study reinforce this impression; as expected, there were downturns in internationalisation activity during the pandemic, but looking forward, two-thirds of respondents indicated that they expect internationalisation to accelerate on their campuses in the next five years.

This sense of optimism, however, is counterbalanced by growing concerns at the geopolitical level. In his earlier [ACA Think Piece](#), Ulrich Grothus noted that there are 'several dilemmas and conflicting goals that need to be reconciled' when it comes to global engagement for European institutions. Overall, he notes, 'We want to keep international cooperation as open as we possibly can, but we cannot ignore the challenges to freedom, intellectual property and security'. US institutions are facing the same issues, and wrestling with whether and how campus global engagement strategies and activities need to change as a result.

In navigating both the emerging opportunities and considerable challenges of the current moment, US interest in collaboration with European partners remains robust, on a variety internationalisation activities;

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indeed, such partnerships may be especially critical for establishing and sharing best practices and strategies to address the issues highlighted by Ulrich Grothus. And guidance from the recent European Strategy for Universities, outlining the European Union (EU) level ambitions in higher education cooperation, and calling for increased global engagement with the US and other countries, with attached funding, potentially provides an opportunity not only for existing US and European partners to expand their collaborations, but to welcome a greater variety of institutions – such as US community colleges – into this collaborative space.

In considering how to operationalise this cooperation opportunity, there are some key points of intersection between higher education trends in the US and the strategy's goals, which European institutions and agency leaders might bear in mind for their future collaborative activities.

Employability and workforce development are top priorities across sectors.

Earlier this spring, on a Tuesday, I was part of a gathering about engaging more community colleges (access-focused institutions that typically grant a two-year degree) in the Fulbright programme. We asked participants – faculty and administrators from community colleges – about the top priorities on their campuses, both broadly and for internationalisation. The number one answer: employability and workforce development. On Wednesday of that same week, I was at Princeton University to participate in a review of the East Asian Studies programme. Our advisory council team met with PhD students to learn about their experiences in the programme and hear what was on their minds. Their primary response: getting a job post-graduation, and their long-term career prospects. Very different contexts, institution types and audiences, but a consistent theme.

At a time when questions about the value and relevance of higher education have been raised in the US and around the world, global collaborations that enable institutions to respond to national and local economic needs provide tangible work experience for students, and facilitate dialogue about what we mean by workforce development in the short- and long-term, will help reinforce the higher education value proposition. In the same vein, the European Strategy notes: 'We need to facilitate and reinforce transnational cooperation between universities to strengthen their capacities to equip young people, lifelong learners and researchers with the right competences and skills'. Certainly, this message will resonate with current and potential US

partners.

The strategy goes on to highlight the need to build partnerships with the private sector to create an "industry ecosystem", and to stimulate creative thinking and entrepreneurship through "living labs". Finding potential partners located in US geographic areas that share similar economic underpinnings or similar local challenges can be an excellent starting point to develop exchanges and internships, collaborative research, and other joint projects that deepen knowledge and facilitate sharing of best practices.

As an example, a few years ago I worked with a university in the southeastern state of Virginia to develop their strategy for internationalisation and global engagement. The institution is located on the Atlantic coast, in a flood-prone area. Recognising the need for local businesses to manage flooding as well as research on how best to handle it, the university sought partnerships with institutions in other flood-prone regions of the world, to collaborate around this locally-relevant issue.

Partnerships might also address labour market gaps. For example, the US as a whole and many rural communities in particular face a shortage of skilled nurses. Training programs in this area are often the purview of local community colleges, which could be excellent candidates for establishing student and faculty exchanges in this field, as well as hosting incoming international students. Many US institutions have offices focused on community engagement and economic development; these can be a good starting point for identifying points of commonality to build upon.

In addition, the *European Strategy* emphasises the need for upskilling and reskilling, and the objective of properly developing and providing microcredentials to support lifelong learning. While institutions across US higher education sectors offer opportunities in this space, for community and technical colleges, they are a fundamental part of institutional mission, and a long-time institutional focus. As European institutions and agencies seek global partners, the time is right to explore and expand ties with these institutions, which educate nearly 40% of enrolled US students, diversifying collaboration with non-research-intensive types of institutions being an emerging topic also in the European context.

At the European Fulbright directors meeting mentioned previously, I was pleased to hear significant interest in engaging more deeply with community colleges, though there were some challenges noted. Often, community colleges do not have an international

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programmes office, or other institutional infrastructure around internationalisation, so finding an “in” can be an initial barrier. However, these institutions are often small, and in the spirit of “community” they are tight-knit; finding one point of connection, whether a student, faculty member, administrator, or local community member, can open the door and facilitate relationships.

National organisations, such as the [Association of Community College Trustees](#), where I work, can also help identify potential partners based on specific programmes and academic areas, shared local industry, and interest in global collaboration.

It is a complex time for diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives, but “divisiveness fatigue” is growing.

The *European Strategy* calls for a ‘European framework for diversity and inclusion, including on gender gaps, identifying challenges and solutions for universities, and the needed support of public authorities.’ Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) have been stated values in US higher education institutions for many years, but after the murder of George Floyd and a number of other national events in 2020, there have been concerted efforts to operationalise these values in a more tangible way. Many campuses created or amplified leadership positions and offices to lead DEI initiatives across campus, review policies and practices with a DEI lens, and facilitate success and a sense of belonging among students from all backgrounds.

In recent months, however, [legislation](#) in an increasing number of US states has aimed to curtail, and in some cases, ban such initiatives. Campuses are wrestling in the moment with how to continue their commitment to DEI without running into legal and financial consequences. There are no easy answers.

Despite this legislation and an overall politically polarised climate – in higher education and beyond – my sense is that we are heading toward a state of what I have termed “divisiveness fatigue”. In many contexts, polarisation has reached a point where it is hindering day-to-day business and functioning. On campuses, we see it from the classroom to the boardroom, impeding learning and even institutional governance, ultimately to the detriment of students and their success.

Campus leaders I have talked to across the political spectrum have indicated that this is not acceptable; we need to be able to work across political differences towards shared goals and instill in our students (and others on and beyond campus) the ability to

engage in civil dialogue. As international education practitioners have long realised, working together with peers and colleagues from different cultural and linguist backgrounds helps build these skills. As European institutions consider their engagement with US counterparts, including structured opportunities for joint problem-solving and discussion of critical issues among students will help US institutions foster civil dialogue and an inclusive campus environment.

Research collaborations are not a stated internationalisation priority, but...

The *European Strategy* underscores the importance of global research collaborations, which are increasingly a formal part of institution and faculty performance measures in many parts of the world. Consistently across the two decades that the American Council on Education (ACE) has collected US higher education internationalisation data, however, global research collaborations have ranked low on the list of priority activities. When it comes to faculty promotion and tenure policies, international engagement and collaboration is rarely explicitly mentioned as a criterion.

While this data may suggest a mismatch of priorities between Europe and the US when it comes to potential partnerships, in reality, it may be more reflective of the level at which such collaborations originate, and the way they are framed and incentivised. ACE’s Mapping Internationalization on US Campuses study surveys administrators about institution-level priorities; student mobility and curriculum development are at the fore among this population, likely with the assumption that research collaborations are the purview of the faculty and will emerge in a ground-up manner as faculty connect with counterparts abroad.

In terms of faculty evaluation and rewards, at research-oriented institutions, attaining a global reputation and overall prominence in the field is a key performance measure, along with a strong publication record. Certainly, global research collaborations contribute to both outcomes; however, it is often left to faculty members to recognise this and incorporate the impacts of global research collaboration into their professional narratives. Thus, for European institutions seeking research-focused collaborations in the US, identifying and connecting individual faculty members may be the right starting point, as well as developing multifaceted institution-level partnerships that include student mobility and other activities that are top of mind for campus leaders.

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When it comes to the research security issues highlighted by Ulrich Grothus in his Think Piece, there is growing recognition that faculty cannot and should not be left on their own to navigate these waters with potential partners. On many campuses, research offices are focusing on ensuring compliance with export control regulations set forth by the US Departments of State, Commerce, and Treasury, and providing institutional frameworks and policies for engagement (for example through websites such as those created by [Cornell University](#) and the [University of Michigan](#)); national-level organizations such as the [Association of American Universities](#) are also providing guidance. Even when research collaborations originate at the faculty level, it is important that all parties seek counsel from campus research offices; failure to do so may curtail subsequent engagement.

Toward a national policy?

The European Strategy serves as a policy framework to promote cooperation among European universities more largely, and those involved in European Universities alliances more specifically, and enable them 'to mutualise their strengths together, make common strategic decisions, act together with a legal personality, and facilitate pooling together resources, activities and data', providing a European umbrella to multiple national-level policy for international education, including from NAFSA: The Association of International Education Administrators, which advocates for such a [strategy](#) to originate from the White House.

In 2021, the Departments of State and Education issued a '[Joint Statement of Principles in Support of International Education](#)', which set forth national priority activities for government agencies and the broader international education field, and called for collaboration among stakeholders. It does not, however, prescribe activities, entail regulation, or allocate funding.

In a 2015 report for the American Council on Education, I asserted that given the decentralized structure of the US government, and the number and variety of institutions in the US, it would be difficult to develop a unified national policy that would be both broad enough to encompass the entire system and its goals, and specific enough to spur meaningful change. While the debate continues about the need for such a policy and the form it should take in the US, it seems unlikely that type of framework and legal statutes called for in the *European Strategy* are likely to be replicated on this side of the Atlantic.

Regardless of the policy landscape, the impetus for global higher education collaboration in the US has long rested at the institution level. Reasons and avenues for such partnerships vary greatly, and provide an array of opportunities and options for European institutions seeking to engage in the US. As European priorities and frameworks emerge, the opportunity to involve new actors, activities, and focus areas is an exciting prospect, with potential to benefit students, faculty, institutions, and the broader national and global communities in which they operate.

This article is part of the **2023 "ACA Think Pieces" series – European higher education cooperation in a global context**, launched in May 2023. Through their expert contributions in the series, the authors constructively reflect on some of the ongoing debates around the role, the principles and desired openness of international cooperation in higher education (and research), in an increasingly complex geopolitical context. The pieces invite for critical reflections, together with the authors, around some of the much-debated concepts of "knowledge security" and "knowledge diplomacy", values-anchored international cooperation and "European values", prioritising "like-minded" partners, and more, as well as for visionary approaches and practical solutions paving the future of cooperation. The series also channels responses from outside of Europe to these debates and their relevance from partners' perspectives, when assessed through their own priorities, needs and expectations towards cooperation with European partners. The articles are published electronically towards the end of each month on the ACA website, from May until December 2023.