

# **OUTREACH: CURRENT CHALLENGES AND FUTURE PROSPECTS**

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## **Abstract**

For more than a quarter-century the U.S. Department of Education has funded and empowered a network of university-based international and area studies centers (National Resource Centers of Excellence, or NRCs) to promote the teaching of Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America, and Middle East area studies in American precollegiate schools. Outreach programs based at these NRCs, currently numbering 114, have developed a host of activities, materials and strategies to implement this objective, deemed essential to the national interest.

The intent of this paper is to examine and evaluate the range of programs designed to meet the challenge vis-à-vis the broader educational goals and objectives articulated by policy makers and the profession at large. Have outreach programs been successful? What are their shortcomings and/or limitations? And given the current emphasis on national standards and accountability, what can outreach programs do to achieve desirable results in educating students and their teachers to face the challenges of the twenty-first century?

## **Range of Activities**

While the NRCs are engaged in a wide variety of outreach programs to the K-12 communities, teacher training and professional development has emerged over the past quarter-century as the most important enterprise for improving instruction, as recognized by the priority status that state and federal governments have assigned to this endeavor. All current 114 NRCs have active in-service programs that reach educators in the local, state, regional and national arenas. In-service programming includes seminars and

workshops at the school site and district levels, weekend on-campus seminars, summer seminars including NEH summer institutes for teachers, and summer Fulbright-Hays Group Projects Abroad.

The authors identified a myriad of exemplary teacher training modalities including:

- Intensive Area Studies Training. Designed to provide in-depth knowledge about a specific world region, these programs encompass classroom contact hours equivalent to a quarter-long university course.
- Thematic Approach. Universities with multiple NRCs have developed a host of such collaborative training programs in response to state standards that increasingly call for thematic and comparative approaches to teaching and learning.
- Special Topic Workshops. Issue-oriented programs usually dealing with contemporary “hot-spots.”
- Overseas Training. In 2002, more than 500 teachers took advantage of DOE projects organized by the NRCs in 30 countries.
- School Site Programs. Involve a permanent team of NRC staff, faculty and graduate students who speak in K-12 classrooms and at school assemblies.
- On-line Programs. Teachers are able to enroll in guided courses via the Internet and receive university credit upon completion.

Other successful K-12 outreach activities include:

- Outreach to Students. Several NRCs have special programs oriented to K-12 students. These include museum exhibitions, language programs for high school students, and week-long summer residential enrichment programs for middle and high school students.
- Electronic Outreach. Many NRCs are developing web-based materials and comprehensive web databases of materials for K-12 educators and students, as well as moderated listservs and modular curricula. Numerous NRCs work with public television and educational channels to develop interactive websites for teachers and students. Some NRC-produced websites featuring online libraries of digital resources and web links get millions of hits each year from over a million individual users.

- Textbooks. A number of outreach professionals have actively engaged major publishers, encouraging them to use NRC faculty and outreach personnel as authors and consultants. Book awards by outreach councils acknowledge excellence and innovation in the field.
- Lending Libraries. Many NRCs have significant collections of K-12 audiovisual and print materials available for loan to educators in the United States.
- Material Development. All NRCs have a tradition of sharing relevant materials with K-12 educators. Shared materials include both library resources (texts, children's literature, current news sources) and curricular materials they have developed or that have been developed by other NRCs.
- Collaboration. Increasingly, multiple NRCs within a single university as well as NRCs from different universities and world regions have forged important and long-lasting working relationships, including the sharing of resources and expertise and the pursuit of joint teacher training and materials development projects. On the national level, the emergence of outreach councils representing Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Middle East has led to synergies among the members and a cooperative spirit that will further bond the outreach community at large.

### Challenges for the Immediate Future

Despite of the many successes described above, the outreach profession faces numerous challenges to its viability. These include the following:

- The growing trend to require “quantifiable” empirical evidence as the primary measure of international studies impact in the nation's schools.
- Because our outreach endeavors have a national mandate, initiatives that have an intended national audience must take national standards into consideration, even if we view them as inadequate in general or find specific standards to be problematic. Curricular initiatives that do not reference and take into account these standards and benchmarks will be ignored by educators and administrators.
- While outreach is touted in university mission statements (and most particularly in those of Land Grant institutions), the reality in many cases is that outreach is not

considered central to knowledge generation and dissemination, i.e., to the core mission of the academy.

- Without an adequately resourced professional staff, it is impossible to develop an outreach program that has a sustained impact on the local, state, regional and national levels. Likewise, without a truly professionalized outreach cadre, our efforts lack credibility and cannot be expected to be taken seriously by state-level officials.
- A major stumbling block to international and area studies education in K-12 is the fact that few teachers have expertise in the field. NRC outreach initiatives to educators have traditionally addressed this problem through in-service programs (workshops, summer institutes, Group Projects Abroad, etc.) and by developing curricular support materials for dissemination, but we have not been effective in actively engaging pre-service teacher training in the nation's Schools of Education.
- Effective national, regional and state-wide engagement with K-12 education and educators will depend on our ability to interact with and engage 1) state organs responsible for developing standards and benchmarks, 2) national-level K-12 professional organizations, 3) major textbook publishers, and 4) virtual/web-based projects.