

# **Transnational Higher Education in the Age of Convergence**

**Jeffrey S. Lehman**

**National Fulbright Conference  
October 16, 2014**

It is a pleasure for me to be speaking with you at this year's National Fulbright Conference, one that is taking place on this beautiful campus on the occasion of the 30th anniversary of the renewal of Fulbright Program grants to support exchange between the U.S. and China.

These past thirty years have been a remarkable time in human history. I have sometimes referred to this time period as an "Age of Globalization." This morning, however, I would like to refer to it somewhat more provocatively, as an "Age of Convergence."

When I was growing up in the United States, my world had strong boundaries. I knew there was a world beyond America. I knew that my ancestors had come from other countries. I read books written by people who had lived in other countries. From time to time I met people who had come from other countries.

But more than 99.9% of my interactions with were with other Americans. My worldview was shaped by American television and American newspapers and American movies. All the people I spoke with every day were Americans. And all the people my parents spoke with every day were Americans. My communications network was bounded. And I assumed that this would be true for my entire lifetime.

I was wrong. My children's world is totally different, because they grew up in the Age of Convergence. The Age of Convergence has been defined by new technologies of information, communication, and transportation. Those technologies have led people around the world to sense that their destinies are converging.

The internet means that people are interacting with people all around the world every day. The WTO means that international trade has gone from 30% of total global production of goods and services to 60%. And cheaper transportation means that people are moving around.

This is, in my opinion, wonderful. The technologies of globalization have enabled us to live much more interesting lives. We are connected to all humanity, and that is thrilling for its own sake. And we have the opportunity to work in cooperation with people who have had very different experiences, so that we can all understand things more profoundly than would have been possible if we were limited to working with people just like ourselves.

At the same time, however, we have had to come face to face (literally) with two realities that we did not appreciate before. The first reality is that all humans are similar to one another, no matter where they were born. All humans value happiness and love and respect. All humans avoid pain. But the second reality is that people who were raised in different cultures understand those values in very different ways. And those differences can lead people to misunderstand one another very badly. They can lead a person to think another person was trying to insult them when in fact the other person was trying to show them respect. They can lead a person to think another person is stupid when in fact the other person is very wise indeed.

During the past thirty years, a great deal of wonderful writing has been done about the nature of cultural differences. Some of the most interesting writing has discussed the way that the differences seem to be largest between East and West, and may be the very largest between China and the United States. People who are biologically identical but who grow up in different societies learn to see the world in strikingly different ways.

I would, however, like to give you a small taste of this writing, a book called *Tiger Writing*, by Gish Jen.

Gish Jen's mother is from Shanghai, and her father is from Jiangsu Province. They each moved to America in the 1940's and met each other in New York. Their daughter Gish grew up in the suburbs of New York

and attended Harvard and Stanford and the University of Iowa. She married an Irish-American named David O'Connor.

Jen's career has been as a writer. She mostly writes fiction, and her fiction has won almost every literary prize that exists. In recent years she has been frequently described as the Great American Novelist.

Her book *Tiger Writing* is not a work of fiction. It is, rather, a collection of speeches she gave at Harvard last year about cultural differences and the way her Chinese identity and her American identity have each affected the way she writes.

In the first speech, she discusses her father's autobiography. She shows with great care how her father thought of his own life. He was not "the star of his own movie." Instead he was part of a long history. He was one generation in a family that went back thousands of years. He was one of the many people who passed through beautiful buildings that were intended to last many lifetimes.

In the second speech, Jen connects her father's autobiography with work by the psychologists Qi Wang and Richard Nisbett. These two researchers have drawn together a substantial amount of evidence demonstrating that people who grow up in America and people who grow up in China really are taught to see the world in different ways. Chinese are taught to study a scene; Americans are taught to study the primary objects in a scene. Chinese are taught to study relationships; Americans are taught to study key points. Chinese are taught to think of themselves as connected to their environment, as interdependent with other people; Americans are taught to think of themselves as independent actors.

In the third and final speech, Jen talks about how her own writing combines elements of the American identity with elements of her parents' Chinese identity. The characters in her writing are both independent and interdependent. She appreciates both ways of seeing, both ways of thinking, and she enjoys trying to fuse them into a single new way of thinking about the world.

Gish Jen is, in my opinion, an exceptional example of the benefits that are available when we recognize the realities of cultural similarities

and cultural difference, when we recognize the potential benefits that can be gained from mixing together people from different cultures, and when we have access to people like Gish Jen, people that I often describe as “bridge people.”

I know that, as Fulbright alumni, you have seen the positive possibilities that exist when different cultures are combined. In a world where technology makes it easier for people to work in diverse teams, across great distances, there is a tremendous opportunity – for businesses certainly but for the non-business aspects of society as well. Culturally diverse teams have the possibility of seeing issues in more complex, subtle, and accurate ways because the members of those teams would bring different perspectives to every problem, and the group could integrate those different perspectives in ever more powerful ways.

But this tremendous benefit comes inseparably joined to a tremendous problem. I have assumed that this culturally diverse group of individuals can come together and transcend their differences to produce a richer, more subtle group analysis. But that assumption will be manifestly false if members of a diverse team are unable to work together because of cross-cultural misunderstanding.

In the years ahead, I believe that one of the most valuable skills that any person can have is the bridge person’s ability to help culturally diverse groups to work well together, to recognize cross-cultural misunderstandings and help the team to get past it.

An effective bridge person must have three qualities. He or she must be able to see the world from his or her own culture’s perspective and also from that of a different culture. He or she must be able to engage sympathetically with all perspectives, without rushing to say that one perspective is right and the other perspective is wrong. And finally he or she must be able to explain how the cross-cultural misunderstanding occurred in a way that allows everyone to appreciate it and work towards a solution without feeling that they have lost face.

I submit to you that the skills of the effective bridge person are higher-order skills than, say, the ability to run a least-squares regression. They are important for more than their ability to yield discrete outcomes.

The skills of the effective bridge person are catalytic. They are technologies that drive new kinds of processes. They multiply the force that individuals bring to bear on any given problem.

Our world needs effective bridge people. Our world needs its universities to help students to become effective bridge people. Our world needs higher education to be understood in more than simply national terms. Our world needs transnational higher education.

A university that offers transnational higher education has, as part of its core mission, an ambition to help all its students develop the knowledge, the virtues, and the skills that will enable them to enjoy lives of satisfaction and contribution in the twenty-first century.

The knowledge includes knowledge of the historical development of humanity's most influential ideas – especially in the natural sciences, in moral and political philosophy, and in economics. It also includes knowledge of the history of cultural expression, and global political history.

The virtues include empathy, humility, geography of spirit, courage, authenticity, and curiosity.

The skills include rigorous analysis, numeracy, and computer literacy. But in the Age of Convergence I would submit they also include the skills of multilingualism and cross-cultural effectiveness.

This last one is crucial. The ability to be effective working in a group where one is not a member of the dominant culture.

What happens when a university incorporates this particular skill into its mission?

Such a university quickly discovers that it has implications for every dimension of its operations. Of course it would affect the approach to admissions, because it is much easier to teach this skill with a diverse student body.

But it cannot stop there. One cannot simply assume that the students, faculty, and staff who inhabit one's campus will become effective bridge people by accident, simply because the community happens to be more

diverse than they once were. One cannot simply assume that by putting together a class that includes Asians and Europeans, Africans and Americans, they will be prepared to make the kinds of contributions the twenty-first century will need them to make.

To be successful in this domain, an institution of higher education needs to plan more comprehensively. It needs to consider what this kind of change in mission implies for the curriculum, for the pedagogic techniques that are used to teach, for the approach to extracurricular student life, for who is hired to join the faculty and administrative staff, for how the faculty and administrative staff are trained.

Such an institution needs to think carefully about the soft, non-quantifiable but tremendously important matter of institutional culture and how it takes account of national cultures.

It must become part of the institutional culture to actively and explicitly talk about national cultural differences. Every member of the community must be expected to become more thoughtful about when such differences in national culture are irrelevant and when they matter greatly.

And here is where the greatest opportunities exist. Because today, right now, there is no simple, easy, agreed-upon way for an institution of higher education to do the things that I have been describing. The research on cultural differences is still developing. Even more importantly, our understanding about how to turn that research into practice is truly primitive.

We need to understand – much more completely than we do today – what cultural differences exist, and how they matter. Even more, we need to understand – much more completely than we do today – what techniques individuals can use as members of diverse groups to interpret and transcend difference and mutual misunderstanding. Finally, we need to develop a pedagogy, a mix of didactic instruction and practice-based experience that will effectively nurture these understandings in people – a way to help them become the most effective bridge people possible. We need to determine how we can best help them become people who are able both to diagnose culture-based misunderstanding and to treat it,

people who are able both to recognize the opportunities for deeper multi-perspective-based understanding and to help a group to realize those opportunities.

I have had the privilege of being associated with two institutions that have approached these issues seriously: the Peking University School of Transnational Law, and NYU Shanghai. The first works with a post-graduate population of 22-26-year-olds, the second with an undergraduate population of 18-22-year-olds. They have taken different approaches to these questions, and I believe they have each been successful in their own way. But they are both early-stage. Much difficult work remains to be done to build on their efforts, to develop version 2.0, and version 3.0.

New schools and universities have the ability to try new things that is very difficult for well-established universities. New schools and universities do not have long traditions that must be preserved. They do not have large groups of established faculty who are used to doing things in a particular way and resist being pushed to experiment.

In both of the new institutions I have been part of, I have found the faculty to have a tremendous spirit. A spirit of pioneers. A spirit of builders. A spirit of experimentation.

And now is the perfect time for us to try new approaches to transnational education, as a whole set of new teaching technologies are available to us. We can use super-high-quality videoconferencing to bring students and speakers together from around the world at very low cost. We can use tremendous combinations of hardware and software to create materials in the cloud – from lecture materials to research materials to individualized sequences of tests. All of these can be constructed with multicultural effectiveness in mind.

And consider the opportunities that lie before any institution of higher education that chooses to direct itself towards this new horizon. Modern, transnational institutions of higher education will become known as the fertile soil in which multi-cultural bridge people are planted, are nourished, and blossom. Their students, their faculty, and their staff can all become known as the kind of people who make multi-cultural teams ef-

fective. They can be bridges around the world, pathways that enable the peoples of our planet to work together in close cooperation.

In the twenty-first century, people all over the world are facing a set of grand challenges together. Climate change. Ebola. Terrorism. Water and energy scarcity. I have an optimistic heart, and I believe this century will be remembered as one in which bridge people like Fulbright Scholars, combine their separate and complementary strengths to meet those challenges. But I also know that my belief is much more likely to come true if we are able to create more and more institutions of transnational higher education.

I hope that all of you, Fulbright alumni, preeminent examples of bridge people, will raise your voices in support of transnational higher education. Your experiences can give powerful testimony in support of China's continuing leadership in this important domain. I thank you for taking the time to listen this morning, and I would be happy to take questions.