International Education in the 21st Century

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In his State of the University Address on August 28, 2009, UM President George M. Dennison affirmed that the University of Montana seeks “to respond to the great educational challenge of our lifetime.... To return the United States to world leadership in the educational attainment of its citizenry.” Yet, he noted somberly with respect to education “everyone knows the United States has slipped to the second tier of ranked countries and appears poised to fall into the third tier unless we take action.” In today’s world the U.S. shares the international stage with other rising powers including China, India, Brazil, and Europe, yet world leadership in the educational attainment of its citizenry remains a worthy if utopian goal for our country. Here I would like to offer a formula that may help us grasp why we must redouble our efforts in this direction, namely, E=PPD. Here E stands for Education, the first P for Power, the second P for Prosperity, and the D for Democracy. In short, Education is indispensable for the achievement of some of our most important national and social goals. The universal extension throughout the United States of primary and secondary education in the past century, and the opening up of higher education opportunities, particularly after World War II, was the foundation upon which the edifice of American power and prosperity was erected. It was also the guarantor of a vibrant democratic politics. This is not to deny that enormous and crippling educational inequalities have existed and in fact persist with respect to race, ethnicity, socio-economic status, and region. The power that education should provide is not that which wins wars, but intellectual power that solves pressing problems such as global climate change, international conflict, poverty, hunger, and epidemic disease. The prosperity that education should provide is not that in which the super rich indulge their every
whim while most Americans struggle to maintain a modest standard of living, but one in which all who work hard and contribute to the general good can earn their fair share. The democracy that education should foster is not one in which entertainment eclipses civic knowledge and corporate billions determine social policy, but one in which well-informed citizens weigh and debate critical choices. By these standards we are in deep trouble as a nation. Our schools graduate too many students who lack basic historical, geographic, and culture knowledge about our country and the world. In a recent national assessment only 25 percent of fourth graders, 24 percent of eighth grader, and 32 percent of twelfth graders attained grade level proficiency with respect to basic knowledge of our own national political system. Fewer than 3 percent of Oklahoma high school students could pass the test required of applicants for naturalized U.S. Citizenship. Only 23 percent knew that George Washington was the first U.S. President; only 14 percent identified Thomas Jefferson as the author of the Declaration of Independence. Our popular culture is assertively anti-intellectual, valuing athletic prowess over intellectual attainment, TV celebrities over Nobel laureates. The situation with respect to international education at all levels is even more disturbing. While foreign students flock to the U.S. in record numbers (624,000 in 2007-2008), just 242,000 Americans studied abroad that year or just 1.36 percent of the total number of students at the college level, most in brief stints and most in English-speaking countries. Only 10 percent study in Asia, fewer than 5 percent in the Middle East and North Africa despite the obvious importance of these world regions. (Incidentally, Montana colleges and universities ranks 44th nationally in the percentage of students studying abroad.) Our knowledge of foreign languages is deplorable. Since the world speaks English we scarcely bother to learn other tongues. Though Asia is increasingly the center of global development, we live in a time warp. At UM this semester there are 11 sections of elementary Spanish, 5 of French, 4 of
German but only 2 of Arabic, 2 of Chinese, 3 of Japanese, and 2 of Persian. Yet the addition of Arabic and Persian is a welcome sign of the accelerated change that must come. This year the Mansfield Center is offering elementary Chinese via distance learning to some 200 high school students around the state, taught by two teachers from Chongqing in western China. In sum, we must double and treble our efforts at international education. By investing locally and at the state and national levels, we can demonstrate that our dedication to education, and international education in particular, is more than mere lip service.