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FEATURE

Cosmopolitan Education

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Globalization: *understood economically as a structural transformation of the world's economic order mainly effected by advances in technology and communication*

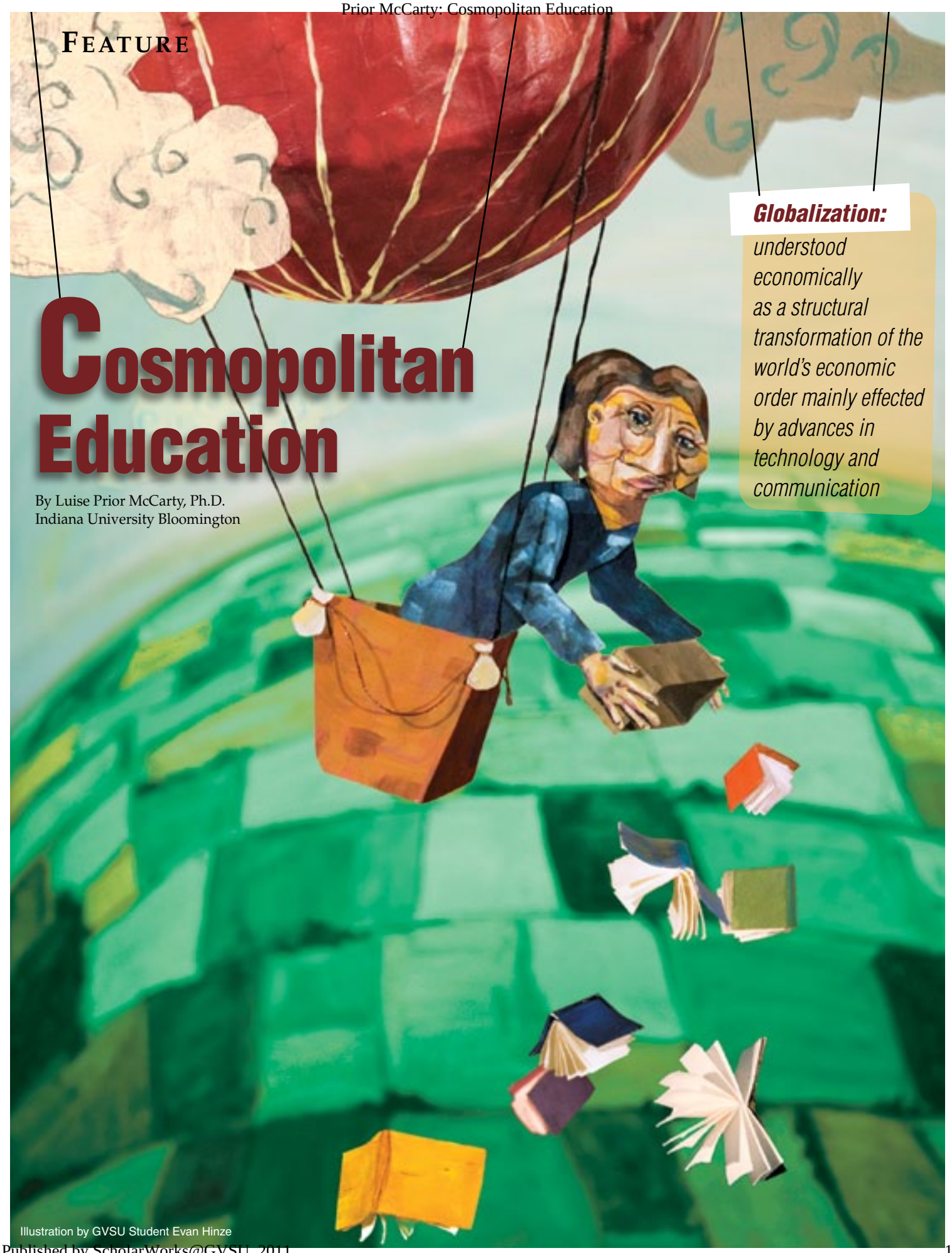

Illustration by GVSU Student Evan Hinze

What does the future of education hold in a smaller world?

Globalization is the new buzzword in many circles, and institutions of higher education are struggling to align their mission and educational goals to the challenges of this global, interconnected world. In conjunction with globalization, cosmopolitanism is another popular term that is gaining currency in many quarters of the academics to capture the inter connectedness of peoples and to carve out a new normative approach to preparing future global citizens.

We shall explore cosmopolitanism as a new educational goal by connecting it with an educational ideal that has its roots in the neo-humanistic conception of the modern university of the early 19th century. This ideal, referred to in German as *Bildung* (the formation and cultivation of the self in relation to the world) is worth re-examining since it can form the foundation of a more contemporary educational vision, one that conceives of a broadly and liberally educated, cosmopolitan person at home in a global world. As argued by Martha Nussbaum and Dianne Ravitch, a liberal education is a requirement for the 21st century student and certainly for the global citizen (2010)."

The First Modern Universities

W. von Humboldt established the Berlin University in 1809 that served as model for the modern university in many countries east and west. The Humboldtian conception of the university—based on the ideal of freedom of research and freedom of teaching—constituted academic freedom as one of the cornerstones of academic life. Humboldt envisioned a new social institution that allowed the full development of human capacity of individuals who dedicate their life to science (*Wissenschaft*) as the highest form of moral life. But this individual perfectibility (*Bildung*) as a form of life was not to serve selfish individual needs nor was it to be instrumentalized for social or other purposes. Rather, this ideal could become a reality in a new institution populated by individuals dedicated to the pursuit of pure science for its own sake.

The new university's ideal of education and science was not to be determined by practical concerns of society nor was it to provide preparation for a career or profession since such goals would distract from the ideal of moral perfectibility of humanity and science for applied ends. Furthermore, openness to new ideas and the search for new knowledge are the marks of this new university, according to von Humboldt, which would be accomplished through a unification and integration of research and teaching and pursued freely and autonomously. This freedom and autonomy of research and teaching would, however, serve indirectly the practical needs of the state to have educated "servants of the state" and citizens who are:

- Independent thinkers and actors
- Persons with moral character that contribute voluntarily to the social good
- Effective in working toward the improvement of human and social conditions

It is thus in the interest of the state and its leaders to finance the university while granting academic freedom and autonomy.

Making it Work

A consequence of this conception of freedom and autonomy entailed a life of "loneliness and freedom" for both professors and students. It also disallowed a structured curriculum or preconceived program of study for the student because it would rob both student and professor of free and self-determined intellectual exchange modeled on Platonic dialogue. For Humboldt, such exchange between the older and younger generation was not about transfer of knowledge but about a form of intellectual life (*Bildung*), a normative ideal. His definition of *Bildung* is about "linking the self to the world in the most general, most unrestrained interplay" (Lüth & Horton-Krüger, 2000).

We can see that Humboldt stresses two directions in his conception of education—an inner process of self-cultivation and an outer process of service toward a social good. In a contemporary adaptation of Humboldt's vision Martha Nussbaum suggests that a cosmopolitan education, requiring a moral commitment to the whole of humanity, is necessary and desirable.

A New Direction

Nussbaum's cosmopolitan focus reflects her concern over a simplistic patriotism and growing nationalism. She clearly sees a central role for education in preparing cosmopolitan citizens when she recommends that our primary commitment should be to humanity as a whole, that students in American classrooms should see themselves "above all citizens of a world of human beings" (Nussbaum, 1996).

By making this the cornerstone of her cosmopolitan education, Nussbaum stresses that giving up affiliations to the local or the familial is not entailed. Rather she suggests an image of concentric circles that develop from a central one, encircling the self, to the family, neighborhood, other affiliations out to the largest circle of humanity. Nussbaum states, "Our task as citizens of the world will be to draw the circles somehow to the center…making all human beings more like our fellow city-dwellers…We may and should devote special attention to them in education. But we should also work to make all human beings part of our community of dialogue and concern, base our political deliberations on that interlocking commonality, and give the circle that defines our humanity special attention and respect" (Nussbaum, 1996). Her argument is that through cosmopolitan education we learn more about ourselves.

It is with the acquisition of dispositions and sensibilities mentioned above that David Hansen conceives metaphorically of cosmopolitan dwellers meeting at the crossroads. They bring with them traditions and inheritances, to which they are loyal but they are to be open, creative and innovative in dealing with the unpredictable and ever-changing, the familiar and the strange.

The crossroads is thus an apt metaphor for the contemporary classroom or school in which individuals and groups with different backgrounds interact. Crossroads are temporary spaces in which we can look back at the familiar places from where we came and they point toward uncertain and unknown paths. Such a place might prepare us for this journey into the future by supplying us with nourishment and equipment, such as maps, as well as good wishes and encouragement. We meet strangers and we are cautious and curious, vulnerable to the risks we are about to undertake. Hansen imagines this to be a cosmopolitan classroom or school in which students are not prepared to remain at home but to become citizens that venture beyond. This vision of self-development (*Bildung*) as an encounter with a strange and exciting world can and should animate the 21st Century ideal of a liberal education.

What might such a cosmopolitan education consist of? Here is a short list: It is

- Primarily a disposition, an orientation or a moral sensibility
- A practical and educationally meaningful process of relating to others
- An intellectual and aesthetic stance of openness to divergent cultural experiences
- A habit of mind where you can end up anywhere in the world and be in the same relation of familiarity and strangeness to the local culture
- Respect and enjoyment of cultural differences with a sense of global belonging
- The "ability to dwell meaningfully in a space of often paradoxical transitions, of openness to the world and loyalty to the local" (Hansen, 2009).

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