

“American Scholarship and the Global Turn”

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For more than half a century, scholars and policy-makers have worried that America’s higher education system pays too little attention to global affairs. This was the motivation for the establishment of the current system of federally-funded university centers for international and area studies in 1958:

The Congress hereby finds and declares that the security of the Nation requires the fullest development of the mental resources and technical skills of its young men and women. The present emergency demands that additional and more adequate educational opportunities be made available ... [to] correct as rapidly as possible the existing imbalances in our educational programs which have led to an insufficient proportion of our population educated in science, mathematics, and modern foreign languages and trained in technology.¹

After two decades of federal funding for foreign language and international studies, a presidential commission reported degradation rather than progress in these fields:

We are profoundly alarmed by what we have found: a serious deterioration in this country’s language and research capacity, at a time when an increasingly hazardous international military, political and economic environment is making unprecedented demands on America’s resources, intellectual capacity and public sensitivity.”²

Three decades after that, the National Research Council reported,

“A pervasive lack of knowledge about foreign cultures and foreign languages threatens the security of the United States as well as its ability to compete in the global marketplace and produce an informed citizenry.”³

This project attempts to measure the extent to which American universities have responded to these challenges over the past half century. In this preliminary report, I present two sets of data suggesting that while American academics have paid more attention to international matters in absolute terms, the ratio of international to domestic scholarship has not increased significantly.

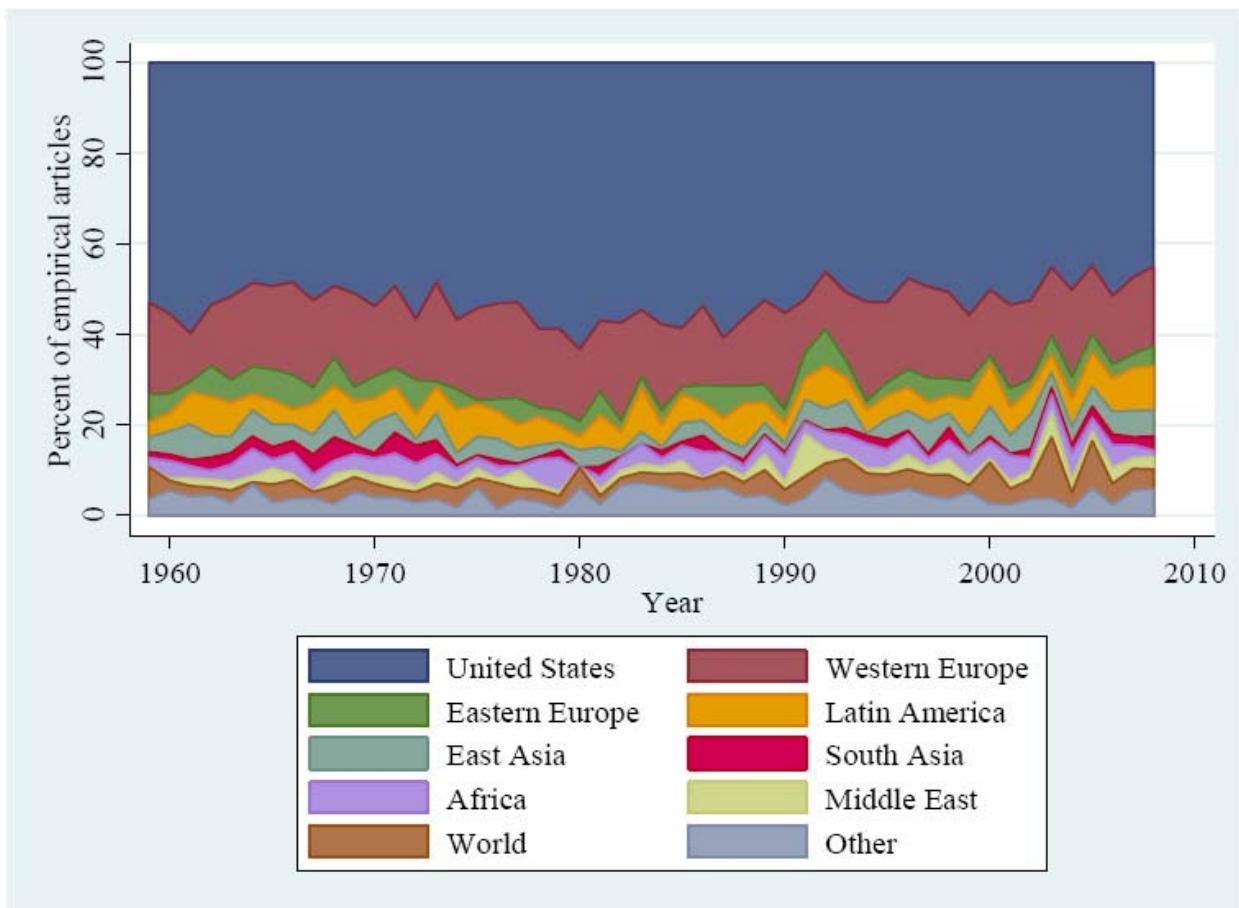
¹ U.S. Congress, *National Defense Education Act of 1958*, Public Law 85-864.

² James A Perkins, *Strength Through Wisdom: A Critique of U.S. Capability: A Report to the President From the President’s Commission on Foreign Language and International Studies* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1979), p. 1.

³ Mary Ellen O’Connell and Janet L. Norwood, eds. *International Education and Foreign Languages: Keys to Securing America’s Future* (Washington, DC: The National Academies Press, 2007), p. 1.

The first indicators come from the flagship journals of six social-science professional associations in the United States (*American Anthropologist*, *American Economics Review*, *American Historical Review*, *American Political Science Review*, *American Sociological Review*, and the *Journal of the Academy of American Geographers*). Each article of six or more pages was hand-coded, on the basis of the title and abstract, to determine what region(s) of the world it covered. Of the articles whose regions could be identified, the proportion focusing on the United States shrank only slightly over the past half century, from almost 60 percent in the 1960s to just over 50 percent in the 2000s. About one quarter of the non-U.S.-focused articles covered Western Europe, shrinking to about one fifth in recent years.

Percent of Flagship Social Science Journal Articles on Each World Region, 1958-2008



A second set of indicators measures the ratio of academic library book holdings from different regions of the world over the past half-century. The source of this data is the OCLC, which has kindly shared Worldcat data with this project. This chart tracks the year of publication of each book held in at least one U.S. academic library – information on the year of library purchase or cataloguing was not available. Four geographic regions are presented: the United States, the United Kingdom, Western Europe (which I have labeled a bit misleadingly with the EU flag), and the rest of the world. The top chart counts the ratio for each record in Worldcat (ignoring the fact that some books are listed in duplicate records). The second chart counts the ratio for all book holdings (if a book is listed as being held in 100 libraries, it counts 100 times in this chart). The upsurge in U.S.-published books in recent years may be due to delays in purchasing and cataloguing foreign materials. In any case, the charts suggest that books in U.S. academic library collections are as likely to be American as they were a half-century ago.

