Executive Summary

The University of Wyoming recently received a grant from the American Council on Education to participate in an internationalization lab, a two-year project that involves a review of the University’s policies, practices and activities that increase international activities, awareness, and education opportunities for Wyoming. Following this review, the University will formulate a strategic plan to improve and expand internationalization opportunities for students, faculty, and statewide constituents by May of 2013. In order to raise awareness in the state and collect information regarding international activities, town hall meetings were scheduled in Laramie, Cheyenne, Casper, Gillette, and Jackson and focus groups were held in Riverton, Powell, Rock Springs, Sheridan, and Torrington. The following executive summary indicates the major themes found in the five focus groups.

Major Findings

Aside from University of Wyoming outreach personnel, forty-two individuals attended the five focus groups to offer their insight and information regarding international education and activities in their community. Every participant who attended the sessions spoke of the vital importance of increasing global awareness in our students and communities. Many participants expressed the opinion that the international experiences they had participated in were “life-changing” or transformative with regard to their personal and professional lives. There was a genuine sense of urgency to create opportunities for students and community members to experience this learning and growth.

Participants expressed the need to prepare our students and citizens to be effective participants in the global economy as our workforce and professional opportunities are becoming increasingly diverse. The ability to communicate and understand diverse languages, negotiation techniques, and business transactions will be a necessary competency for individuals in their professional environments. From a personal perspective, participants expressed the need to expand international education and prevent ethnocentric tendencies in order to create productive relationships with individuals from other cultures. Their view is that relationships build understanding and assist in breaking down barriers caused by fear of the unknown. With increased international experience and exposure, our citizens will be less likely to behave unfavorably or even aggressively toward unknown cultures. This knowledge will also succeed in helping individuals reflect upon and have a greater appreciation of their lives in their own country as well as the opportunity to incorporate innovative and creative practices from other areas of the world.

International connections were present in each focus group community that participants easily identified. Service group student exchanges, faith-based service projects, the Model UN project, and the Business Ambassadors program were mentioned, all of which were championed by a specific individual in the community. The Community Colleges, non-profit organizations such as Education First and
various international businesses were organizations responsible for recruiting or providing opportunities for international residents to relocate to Wyoming. In each case, there was a specific contact in the community who coordinated the opportunities.

There was a surprising amount of events and cultural activities currently taking place in the communities, though participants expressed frustration in successfully informing others in an organized and timely manner about the events, especially on a state-wide basis. Participants attending the focus groups were frequently surprised at the number of events they were unaware of, despite the fact that they were very interested in international activities.

As the focus group communities were less populated, participants were very enthusiastic about supporting a collaborative partnership with the University in order to provide international experiences they would otherwise be unable to accomplish as their numbers are small. Partnering on travel abroad programs, presentations throughout the state by international students and faculty, and additional scholarship programs for inbound and outbound students were areas of potential collaboration. They also felt delivery of international classes and programs to remote areas utilizing technology would offer additional opportunities local education providers are unable to offer. Assistance with ESL (English as a Second Language) was also mentioned, as resources are very limited in smaller communities.

Foreign language instruction was a major point of discussion. A significant concern of the participants was our failure to place a high priority on international education in Wyoming in the K-12 system. The open, uninhibited qualities of young children support the introduction of language and global education in the elementary grades. They felt students would more favorably consider study abroad experiences or student exchanges at the high school and college level if their global education came at a younger age. Participants expressed the need for support from UW in convincing the legislature and political representatives of the importance of foreign language education. Promotion and/or providing incentives through programs such as Hathaway send a very important message to our youth that foreign language education is a priority in our state. The influence of UW is needed, from their perspective, to stress the vital importance of language education throughout our educational system.

The most frequently stated request through all focus group discussions was for the University to take the lead in coordinating a database of resources for information sharing. A forum which would connect individuals in our communities as well as resources of information and events would provide an opportunity for improved communication throughout the state. Additional opportunities were discussed; however, the overwhelming opinion was that there are currently many international education opportunities that fail to reach beyond their immediate sphere of influence, whether that be organizational, geographical, or institutional. There were many individuals in the groups who are passionate about increasing international education opportunities, although they failed to have connection and support with each other or the University. They felt the ability to collaborate on these ideas and relationships would certainly result in additional programming as well as improved exposure and influence for current events, leading to many positives for the state of Wyoming.
Recommendations

As the value and need of international education and activities have been strongly established by participants, the following are facilitator recommendations in which the University can take a leadership role to address perceived needs identified by the participants:

➤ Coordination
  o Establish a database of individuals who are involved in promoting and organizing international activities in various communities, searchable by area of interest or specialty, for communication and information sharing
  o Establish an electronic forum where the University as well as other users may inform the state about upcoming activities, events, or opportunities for international experiences, connecting the international community

➤ Student/Faculty Opportunities
  o Provide additional opportunities and information to the state regarding scholarships and/or financial support for inbound and outbound exchange programs, travel abroad programs, or international education programs for faculty and students
  o Coordinate an international student presentation series for communities and schools, where international students from UW travel the state to share their culture with others
  o Coordinate statewide presentations where visiting faculty/international experts visit various locations in the state to share their expertise with communities and schools
  o Utilize distance delivery methods to offer international education classes and presentations for outreach students and/or community members who are site bound

➤ Foreign Language Education
  o Utilize leadership role in Wyoming State Government to educate others as to the vital importance of foreign language study throughout our educational system (K-12 through undergraduate education)
  o Promote and incentivize foreign language study for Wyoming students of all ages through programs such as the Hathaway Scholarship Program
  o Provide resources for outreach communities to deliver additional ESL programs
  o Provide resources for outreach communities to deliver additional language education courses

➤ *Qualitative research should not be projected to the population at large. Results should be used for insight and direction only. For specific comments, please refer to Site Summary Reports.