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What does the future hold for transatlantic relations? – survey among students on both sides of the Atlantic

Students and researchers at Rhine-Waal University of Applied Sciences and its partner university Fitchburg State recently conducted a survey among students at their respective universities to learn more about how younger generations view transatlantic relations between the United States and Germany. The overwhelming majority of polled students value the ties between the two countries and strongly believe in strengthening their transatlantic partnership for the future.

Kleve/Kamp-Lintfort, 23 June 2020: The idea began with seminars on transatlantic challenges held at Rhine-Waal University of Applied Sciences, which brought together faculty and students in Germany with American colleagues from the International Relations/European class of Fitchburg State University in Massachusetts. A follow-up visit of a delegation from Fitchburg State in 2019 then presented a unique opportunity for both universities to brainstorm new ideas for advancing the long-standing partnership between the two universities.

World political developments over the subsequent months and, more recently, the coronavirus pandemic reaffirmed the importance of a shared and candid transatlantic dialogue in the minds of the three participating professors: Dr. Alexander Brand, Professor of Political Science with an emphasis on International Relations (Rhine-Waal University of Applied Sciences), Dr. Klaus Hegemann, Professor of General Business Economics (Rhine-Waal University of Applied Sciences), and Dr. Joshua Spero, Professor of Political Science (Fitchburg State). This idea motivated new collaborative research efforts between the two universities, including a research project on the current state of transatlantic relations, designed not only to gain a deeper understanding of the views of younger generations on this topic, but also to bridge divides and build greater trust among them.

The project set out to answer simple, yet significant questions: Are transatlantic relations losing their importance? Is the divide between young people on both sides of the Atlantic growing? A pilot survey, organised by a joint team of researchers from both universities, was developed to get to the bottom of these questions, and students at both universities were polled. Despite the challenges posed by the pandemic and the sudden shift to remote teaching at both universities, a total of 400 students volunteered to answer the survey. Students from all majors were contacted by their respective student governments and via their institution's online teaching platform.

The overwhelming majority of polled students value the transatlantic ties between the United States and Germany and strongly believe in strengthening them long-term. This view was held by 67% of students at Rhine-Waal University of Applied Sciences and 73% of students at Fitchburg State. It is important to consider that the survey, which was completely voluntary, tended to attract students who were more inclined to be politically-interested and informed. In fact, 80% of polled students at both universities stated that they kept up to date with the latest news.

Between 75% and 80% of polled students felt an intensive exchange and close contact between students in Germany and the US was particularly important, further underscoring the continued interest of students on both sides of the

Atlantic in strengthening the transatlantic partnership. At the same time, two-thirds of polled students in Germany and three-fourths in the United States saw themselves as future leaders of society. In other words, the “transatlantic glue” holding both countries together does not appear to be in jeopardy, despite all the current political skirmishes.

There were, however, some notable differences between respondents in the US and Germany on some foreign and world policy issues. While a majority of US students (52%) supported the idea that a country should place its national interests above those of the international community, slightly less than a third of German students (30.4%) shared the same sentiment. On the question of whether their country should increase its military involvement worldwide, only 19% of American students responded positively. German students were even less enthusiastic, with only half as many as the American students (9.6%) responding positively. In the researchers’ opinion, it would be too far-fetched to read a “Trump effect” from these figures, however.

This is especially true given the numerous striking similarities among respondents: When asked which type of international engagement (of the US and Germany, respectively) they would prioritize, both groups of students preferred humanitarian missions by far. Both groups do not seem too distant from each other regarding the question of the EU exercising greater autonomy from the US. A majority of German students (53.5%) said they would welcome the German government taking steps to promote more European autonomy. At the same time, only 11.8% of American students opposed the idea of the United States supporting greater European autonomy.

An interesting picture – one requiring further research for a more nuanced look – emerged on the question of US troops currently stationed in Germany and the recently announced withdrawal of a portion of these troops. A minority of students at Rhine-Waal University of Applied Sciences (15.6%) considered these US troops to be of central importance for transatlantic relations. On the US side, however, 43% of students felt they were important, but a majority did not think of them as a central determining factor for good relations between the US and Germany. At any rate, the majority of students surveyed on both sides of the Atlantic do not feel that the announcement of a troop withdrawal will necessarily result in a deterioration of German-American relations.

In the next project step, research initiated by students and professors will be expanded into a representative survey among students at several university locations in the United States and Germany. Content-wise, this second project phase will also investigate how the coronavirus pandemic has affected respondents’ views. As the participating professors emphasize, involving interested and talented young academics in the joint project is of paramount importance; not only as interviewees, mind you, but also as researchers, as was the case in the joint development of the original pilot study.

wissenschaftliche Ansprechpartner:

Professor Alexander Brand, Professor Klaus Hegemann, Professor Joshua Spero



Students from Rhine-Waal University of Applied Sciences and Fitchburg State University with Professors Alexander Brand and Klaus Hegemann during a joint workshop
Professor Joshua Spero