

# EVOLVING ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION IN PEACEBUILDING



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Scholars are far more likely to study war and conflict than they are to study peace and how to sustain it, asserted Peter T. Coleman, director of the Morton Deutsch International Center for Cooperation and Conflict Resolution at Columbia University.

Coleman, who also codirects the Advanced Consortium on Cooperation, Conflict, and Complexity (AC4), was the keynote speaker at the Seminar on Peace and Global Civil Society, held at the NAFSA 2018 Annual Conference & Expo in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Bringing together international educators with scholars and practitioners of peacebuilding, the seminar explored how higher education communities around the world have worked together across political and national boundaries to promote peace and rebuild

societies. The seminar featured case studies from three countries that have recent memories of serious armed conflicts: Colombia, Iraq, and Northern Ireland. Throughout the conference, NAFSA also organized a number of other peace-related events, including the annual Pathways to Peace Luncheon, which aimed to help international educators understand how addressing the needs of refugees is vital to peace.

## RESEARCH SHOULD FOCUS ON PEACE, NOT WAR

Understanding peacebuilding—and the role that education can play in it—is imperative. The problem with studying war rather than peace, according to Coleman, is that we don't understand what it takes to obtain and maintain peace.

The *Positive Peace Report* (2017), an annual publication by the Institute for Economics and Peace (IEP), aptly illustrates Coleman’s assertion that research agendas need to be refocused to attain the goal of lasting peace:

Understanding what creates sustainable peace cannot be found in the study of violence alone. A parallel can be drawn with medical science. The study of pathology has led to numerous breakthroughs in our understanding of how to treat and cure disease. However, it was only when medical science turned its focus to the study of healthy human beings that we understood what we needed to do to stay healthy: the correct physical exercise, a good mental disposition and a balanced diet are some examples. This could only be learned by studying what was working. In the same way, the study of conflict is different to the study of peace, producing very different outcomes. (IEP 3)

Coleman noted that while the international community has recently focused more on the idea of sustainable peace, it has historically looked at peace in relatively simplistic terms with interventions that often have unintended, negative consequences. “The kinds of challenges that revolve around sustaining peace are highly complex. They involve politics and history and ecology and geographic changes in migration,” he explained. “So many times, we in the international community do more harm than good because we’re not aware of the second and third order effects of what we’re doing. That’s an important lesson, particularly for policymakers and people working on the ground.”

Coleman introduced Columbia University’s Human Peace Project, which examines empirical research relevant to peace and starts to visualize it as a complex system. The Columbia research team has found that one of the things that peaceful societies have in common is that they define themselves as peaceful. “They have a clear vision of what that means in terms of the institutions, mindsets,

attitudes, norms, and taboos that are necessary to sustain peace,” Coleman explained.

## HUMANS ARE NOT HARDWIRED TO MAKE WAR

During his seminar address, Coleman argued that many people, especially politicians, continue to view human nature as violent and warlike—a worldview that drives much of the dominant security paradigm. In the U.S. context, for example, he pointed to the glamorization of violence in the media and the militarization of police and security communities. But despite the current legitimization of violence, Coleman cited research indicating that humans have become progressively less violent over the past few centuries. “The good news is that we’re not fundamentally hardwired to make war,” he said.

However, at the same time, certain communities and countries are currently witnessing a spike in violence. “There are more violent conflicts in the world today than there were over the past 30 years. Related to that are extraordinarily high numbers of refugees and internally displaced people, and military expenditures are at historic highs,” Coleman explained.

In 2017, the number of displaced persons worldwide [hit numbers not seen since World War II](#)—68.5 million, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR 2018, 2). Out of this total, 40 million are internally displaced, more than 25 million are refugees, and 3 million are asylum seekers (UNHCR 2018, 2). Against this backdrop, children and youth are especially vulnerable because protracted violence interrupts their access to education. While 34 percent of college-aged youth worldwide attend college or university, only 1 percent of college-aged refugees are enrolled in higher education institutions, according to UNHCR. Similarly, the agency estimates that 264 million primary- and secondary-aged youth were out of school in 2015 (UNHCR 2016). Researchers have expressed concern about the implications of “lost generations” who have grown up in the



midst of war in countries such as Syria, Libya, and Afghanistan. For example, a report conducted by the Ministry of Education, Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, and UNICEF (2018) estimates that almost half of all school-aged children in Afghanistan—nearly 4 million kids—are out of school due to conflict occurring in 2018. These statistics suggest that while research in higher education can help peacemaking efforts, inversely, peace can improve the state of education worldwide.

However, education often falls to the background amid other peacemaking initiatives. During the 2018 Pathways to Peace Luncheon, Anne C. Richard, Centennial Fellow at the Walsh School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University, illustrated this point as she discussed the global refugee crisis. Richard, who served as assistant U.S. secretary of state for the Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration from 2012 to 2017, said that the importance of education, even in the midst of crisis, has not always been recognized by the international community. Popular opinion has been that efforts should be focused on meeting

basic needs, such as food, clothing, and shelter, with the assumption that children will be able to return to school once the crisis has been averted. Unfortunately, that does not always happen.

“[Today’s] crises are not being resolved, so people stay refugees for years and years,” she stated. “I’ve been to places where the grandchildren of the original refugees are now growing up and so that means that if you postpone their education until peace time, you’ve just missed an entire generation of children.”

She added that there are additional benefits to setting up schools for refugee children. It not only gives kids a safe place to go, it allows them to receive psychosocial care for trauma. It also gives their parents a chance to work or seek out other support services for the family.

While there has been increased recognition of the importance of education for refugee efforts, there is still relatively little international aid directed toward educational initiatives. UNESCO (2017) estimated that humanitarian aid to education reached a historic high of \$303 million in 2016,



Education can be a powerful tool in rebuilding, but it can also be used negatively as well.”

but still accounted for only 2.7 percent of a total \$11.3 billion in humanitarian aid. In contrast, the United States alone spent an average of \$5.8 billion in foreign military financing each year between 2011 and 2017, according to the U.S. Department of State.

## EDUCATION HAS TWO FACES

A society’s educational system plays a key role in socializing its citizens and promoting norms. Several speakers noted the importance of training elementary and secondary teachers, as they are the ones who transmit ideas about peace and reconciliation in their classrooms. Therefore, integrating ideas such as empathy and social cohesion into educational systems can be one of the best peacemaking efforts local communities can initiate. “Education where you are taught to tolerate and respect difference and to work things out through constructive conflict [organically grows] a more peaceful community,” Coleman asserted.

Hernando A. Estévez, dean of the School of Philosophy and Humanities at De La Salle University in Bogotá, Colombia, reminded the audience at the peace seminar that “education always is serving some political ideology. It’s serving certain values and it’s adjusting to a specific context or historical moment in which we engage with students.”

Several speakers at the NAFSA peace seminar referred to “the two faces of education” to capture how education is not a politically neutral

endeavor. This phrase originally appeared in research by Kenneth David Bush and Diana Saltarelli (2000), *The Two Faces of Education in Ethnic Conflict: Towards a Peacebuilding Education for Children*, which was commissioned by UNICEF. In the report, Bush and Saltarelli challenge the assumption that education is always a force for good, arguing instead that education can be as divisive as it is unifying—an idea that continues to resonate in 2018.

“Education can be a powerful tool in rebuilding, but it can also be used negatively as well,” said Lori Mason, IREX senior technical adviser and director of the Iraq University Linkage Program, which is funded by the U.S. Department of State. This program has provided support for higher education curriculum development in Iraq, which is in the process of rebuilding its higher education system after years of conflict.

Iraq serves as a strong example of how education can be used as a positive or negative force. According to Mason, the Da’esh, also known as ISIS, had an elaborate educational system used to indoctrinate young people. “In math, they took away the plus sign because it was a Christian symbol. Anything that was related to literature was a strict interpretation of the Koran. It was a total militarization of the curriculum,” she explained. “Now we have to backtrack all the very negative impacts that the Da’esh had on the children and youth that had been a part of that system.”

To counteract these negative effects, government officials in Iraq more recently launched an initiative that removes any content that promotes violence from the curriculum taught by the departments of Islamic studies at the country’s higher education institutions. “We had several committees [that spent 2 years] working on cleaning the curriculum of Islamic studies from these violence-promoting subjects and textbooks. We succeeded in that,” said Fouad Kasim Mohammad, deputy for scientific research affairs at the Iraqi Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research.



## HIGHER EDUCATION HAS A ROLE IN PEACEBUILDING

Some speakers at the peace seminar gave overviews of other ways in which education—and higher education in particular—can contribute to peace. Brandon Hamber, who is the John Hume and Thomas P. O’Neill chair at the International Conflict Research Institute at Ulster University, identified five areas in which he believes higher education can successfully contribute to peacebuilding: (1) creating spaces for dialogue and bringing people together; (2) influencing policy through evidence-based research; (3) empowering local communities and giving voice to marginalized populations; (4) creating the next generation of peacebuilders by educating students; and (5) changing the educational profile of society by creating more opportunities to access higher education.

Other experts shared several concrete examples of the ways that their institutions have contributed to peace in their respective contexts. Peace research coming out of both Queen’s University-Belfast and Ulster University on the conflict between a Protes-

tant majority and Catholic minority has not only informed public policy in Northern Ireland, but researchers have also been able to share lessons learned with other societies in conflict. In Iraq, universities outside of conflict zones hosted students who were displaced from institutions in Da’esh-occupied territory. In Colombia, universities are working with the government to provide access to rural regions that were previously cut off from educational opportunities due to violence between paramilitary groups and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). Higher education institutions in all three countries have also undertaken projects focused on reconciliation and reintegrating former combatants into society.

In addition to nationally focused initiatives, education leaders must also engage in international peacemaking efforts. For instance, universities abroad can offer partnerships focused on capacity building or curriculum development, host displaced scholars, or provide scholarships for refugee students. In the United Kingdom, for example, more than 40 higher education institutions have set up scholarships for refugees and asylum seekers. In the United States, the



Seminar presenter Thomas Hill, New York University

Institute of International Education’s Syria Consortium for Higher Education in Crisis has established a network of more than 80 higher education institutions worldwide that have committed support for Syrian students. Many higher education institutions in Iraq are also actively seeking international partnerships to develop long-term academic collaborations.

### **THERE IS A NEED TO FACILITATE DIALOGUE**

While efforts by institutions at-large are invaluable, Hamber also emphasized the importance of providing positive ways for young people to engage in peacebuilding processes, including opening spaces for dialogue and engagement with global and local issues. He pointed to a study by the United Nations Security Council (2018), which found that governments often respond to extremism with policies that denigrate and often repress legitimate participation of youth in political processes, social movements, peaceful protests, and expressions of dissent. “This tends to narrow civic spaces for the voices of youth,” Hamber said.

The United Nations Security Council (2018) study noted that:

The resilience of youth has the potential to manifest in either positive or negative ways. Where young people are excluded, a small minority may forge alternative places of belonging, status and power that exacerbate the risk of violence, creating a potential vicious cycle. However, the vast majority of young people are not involved in, or in danger of participating in, violence. (8)

Similar sentiments were conveyed during a 2015 NAFSA seminar, “The Role of International Education in Peacebuilding.” “One of my biggest concerns with the current preoccupation with countering violent extremism and radicalization is a lot of the policies tend to shut down free expression and stigmatize what young people are saying that is unpopular or virulent in some people’s eyes. In fact, what we need to do is the exact opposite: create safe venues for those things to be voiced and engaged with,” said Shamil Idriss, president of Search for Common Ground, a global

conflict transformation organization with offices in 35 countries.

Idriss also highlighted the importance of finding ways to expand international exchange and intercultural dialogue given the disparities between the Global North and the Global South. His organization has found virtual exchanges to be one of the most scalable ways to promote intercultural dialogue. “We can’t afford to live in a world where less than 2 percent of young people participate in any kind of exchange experience or study abroad program and where a huge proportion of those are between the United States and Western Europe,” he said.

The challenge for educators is thus to create spaces—whether face-to-face or online—in which young people can interact with others different than themselves, both from their own societies and abroad. Tony Gallagher, professor of education at Queen’s University-Belfast, discussed how they have done this on his campus. “We want our students to become architects of the new future in Northern Ireland, so that they can play an active role as we continue to try and create a sustainable peace and create a new shared society,” he said. “Included in this is a notion of actively creating space in the institution for intercultural dialogue where people can talk about difficult issues.”

NAFSA also empowers students to engage in cross-cultural dialogue and peacebuilding through its involvement with the United Nations Academic Impact (UNAI). UNAI is a global initiative that aligns institutions of higher education with the UN, focusing on the reciprocal relationship between education and the UN’s 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs). Kelly Roberts, assistant director of the Office for International Services at Fordham University, represents both Fordham and NAFSA at the United Nations.

“What we do is to encourage all universities to become associated with the UN, as well as join the UN Academic Impact initiative. What we’re really working toward is to foster global stewardship. Besides engaging with higher education, we

also involve students in high-level UN events,” said Roberts, who chairs NAFSA’s United Nations Special Interest Group. “Global stewardship for us is not just about awareness. It’s also about taking action. We’re bringing our youth representatives into the UN forum to learn about all these things, but then actually inspire them to take action. Through that, they’re actually fostering peace.”

Roberts explained that the SDGs intersect with many of the same issues that lead to war and conflict, illustrating the myriad of elements that influence peacebuilding. “When we talk about peace, we look at how different issues are related to the sustainable development goals. By engaging with the sustainable development goals, students are becoming diplomats on these issues and fostering a global mindset,” she related.

The United Nations will also be hosting the first International Education Day, “Partners in Sustaining our Future—Sharing Goals in Global Stewardship,” which will be held during International Education Week. The event is organized in collaboration with the UNAI, using the SDGs as the blueprint for achieving a more peaceful, just, and equitable world.

By supporting events such as the Seminar on Peace and Global Civil Society and the Pathways to Peace luncheon, NAFSA itself provides a space for dialogue about the role of higher education in peacebuilding. Peace seminar moderator Elizabeth Anderson Worden, who is an associate professor of education at American University, said the NAFSA events present examples of peace research and practice to a new audience. She encouraged international educators to think about the ways in which the work they do intersects with global issues such as peace, conflict, and migration. Worden added that peacebuilding has larger implications for dealing with diversity and reconciling the past at all institutions, not just those in conflict zones: “It is so important that international education practitioners, such as the staff of international student services and study abroad offices, have a deeper sense of foreign affairs and peacebuilding because it’s so integral to the work that they do.”

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