



Doing What We Can

FIVE YEARS AGO, the NAFSA conference was held in another great Canadian city, Montreal. At that opening plenary, we heard from Nobel Peace Prize laureate Wangari Maathai about her remarkable life journey, and about how she came to do so much for Africa and for the world. The most memorable moment of Wangari's inspiring address was her brilliant retelling of a fable of humility and activism about the tiny hummingbird and the great forest fire.

As the other animals scattered and fled the flames, the story goes, the hummingbird decided it would try something else. It flew to a nearby river and gathered a beak-full of water, then flew back and dropped it on the fire. The other animals mocked the hummingbird as it traveled back and forth with its tiny loads of water, saying: "You need more than a beak to make a difference. What do you think you are doing?" And the hummingbird replied: "I'm doing what I can."

Most of us have felt like the hummingbird at some point or another in our lives, facing great odds, feeling alone, but feeling compelled to do what we can. As a community of individuals engaged in international education, we know that doing what we can is fundamental to our ability to shape the future of the world we're living in and to ensure that the values we uphold will prevail. Embracing the notion that we must do what we can inherently means that we do not have the luxury of choosing to stand on the sidelines, or of turning away in hopelessness or disillusionment. This is no easy task, but day after day, we must stay engaged and keep moving forward.

Facing Challenges

We're living through a politically ugly time in the United States. The partisan bickering, congressional inertia, disinformation sowing, and pointless noisemaking have reached truly historic proportions. Sometimes it's hard to sort out what is fact and what is spin; it often feels like the government just doesn't work any more; and too many in leadership positions appear to spend more time trying to ruin each other than trying to work together on behalf of their constituents. Meanwhile, our economy struggles to regain its footing and move toward a bet-

ter future, and political and societal unrest around the world makes the exercise of responsible global leadership vitally important. We face great challenges.

Someone recently asked me what any of us can do in this environment. My answer is simple: Do what you can, and *keep doing it*. As Dorothy Day famously said, "No one has a right to sit down and feel hopeless. There's too much work to do." About six months ago, we witnessed an election whose outcomes suggested the dawning of a political environment that might not be particularly friendly to international education and citizen diplomacy. But each of us must stand up and get back to work. We are the only ones that can change things. Our politicians cannot do it for us—we have to do it and bring them with us.

Taking the Long View

Some people may say: "Why now? Why not wait for the tide to turn? What's the point?"

In public policy, you learn early on that influencing policymakers, influencing public opinion, and helping to bring about meaningful change is a very long road. You have to show up every day, do the hard work of relationship building, work through difficult issues, and take setbacks in stride. And when the po-



Comprehensive Immigration Reform

NAFSA has also been actively engaged in making the case for comprehensive immigration reform for quite some time now; we can readily predict that immigration reform will not be at the top of Congress' agenda this year, but that doesn't mean we can sit back and wait for better days. We have to continue to educate members of Congress, correct misperceptions and inaccurate information that can poison the public debate, and nurture the coalition we will need to make immigration reform work for international education when our chance comes. In all of these things, we need your voice. Many hundreds of you answered our call to stand up and support the DREAM Act in the last Congress. The outpouring of support and persistence by our community and others was overwhelming. The DREAM Act didn't pass, but it will not be forgotten, and the fight goes on. Together we are part

To make a difference, visit Connecting Our World (www.connectingourworld.org), NAFSA's online home for grassroots advocacy, dedicated to bringing together a global community of advocates on behalf of international education.

litical winds don't blow in your favor, you can't quit. You have to stick with it, often through several Congresses, sometimes across several administrations, before your labor bears fruit.

Sometimes this means working to lay critical groundwork even if you figure your cause won't make it across the finish line this time around. For years, NAFSA has been planting the seeds and cultivating support for a national study abroad initiative that would make study abroad widely accessible, available, and attractive for a wide diversity of college students at all types of institutions. To some degree, the reason this effort must be a long-term one is that what we are advancing is a paradigm shift in the way we think about how to pay for study abroad, and about how we go about expanding access in a significant way. What we know is that study abroad for the few (through direct scholarships) simply can't be scaled up enough to work for the many—we need a competitive grant model, so that a

little bit of federal support can go a long way. We have made major progress along the way, and even though the program has yet to be funded, we are already helping to create a culture of institutional and government support for the notion that every student, regardless of their background or major, should have the opportunity to learn abroad.

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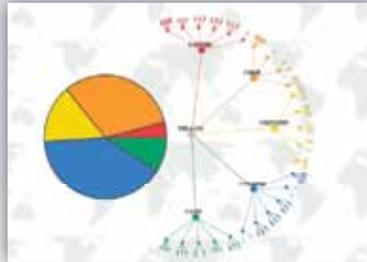
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of a national impulse to do the right thing for undocumented students.

A Successful Outcome: Cuba

You have also answered our call to speak out about lifting the ban on academic travel to Cuba, and in this we can claim a victory long in the making. Earlier this year President Obama directed changes to regulations and policies to open up academic exchanges with Cuba. We should be very proud of what we've achieved together—it took persistence and time, and we faced many discouraging developments along the way. This is how it is with advocacy. The administration's action will make it possible for American college students once again to study in Cuba under general licenses, and to study through programs other than those on their home campuses. It also expands opportunities for faculty and scholarly travel to Cuba, and more. The public debate about

Cuba is often contentious and polarized, but academic exchanges are the high road in the debate, and this has made it possible for us to rise above the partisan politics and simply make the case that with every opportunity for person-to-person contact, especially in the academic context, the possibilities for peaceful change and productive relationships grow. We could have sat out the Cuba debate, of course—but we didn't, because this was a "stand up and be counted" issue. As a victory it is significant in and of itself, but it also sets a marker for the values our community upholds, and builds our credibility on the very important issue of the freedom of academic travel worldwide.

Building Up Our Grassroots

NAFSA's grassroots community has shown a remarkable capacity for laying this kind of groundwork at the state level as well. For several years now, many of you have been

working with state legislatures and through community organizations to urge the passage of state resolutions on international education, with great success. Today 23 states have resolutions on the books; the vast majority of them are explicit in declaring that international education is vital to state economies and essential to student learning, and urge the state to make international education a priority for the future. Some of these resolutions are largely symbolic; others have more teeth. But either way, they are incredibly useful, there to be leveraged to support the positive, and combat the negative. On the latter, consider the proliferation of state-level legislative proposals on immigration. In the absence of comprehensive federal action on immigration reform, a vacuum has opened up and been occupied by a number of ill-advised proposals on how to address illegal immigration and tighten workplace compliance with immigration, and even to question such constitutionally enshrined is-

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sues as birth-right citizenship. Most recently, a number of articles in the regional press have highlighted the enormous potential cost of implementing these proposals, at a time when many states are struggling economically, cutting education and social services, and even contemplating bankruptcy. This is a debate that international educators must be engaged in; as residents and constituents, your voices are enormously influential, and your experiences tell the real story of how immigration policy impacts your community and state.

One thing is certain: the voices on the other side of the debate are loud and persistent. It may feel as though a climate of restrictive and closed-minded policymaking has taken hold. But that is precisely not the time to stop speaking truth to power. Remember, it is your right to be heard: call your state legislators or send them letters; if you hear something on the radio or see something in the paper, add your voice.

There are many ways to be heard. To build support for these types of effort, this year NAFSA is launching a new community organizing initiative called the Grassroots Leadership Program. It is aimed at empowering individuals to make a difference in their communities on issues that impact international education and engaging activists in the creation of resources and toolkits that other activists can use. Our first class of community outreach trainees will meet at NAFSA in June to get started on their work.

Make a Difference

But you don't need special training to be the hummingbird, to make the conscious decision to stand against the tide and "do what you can." Each of us can talk to our family, our colleagues, the people in line with us at the grocery store, our students, and our friends. We can make international education a part of the dialogue we have with our personal community. This is the

best way—and a crucial way—for each of us to own our capacity for leadership. The issues I've outlined above are on the front burner, for better or worse, right now in the United States. We can't sit back and wait; we can't stay silent. It's not always easy to speak out; the vitriol and the political winds sometimes seem to stand against us. But nothing important ever came easily; people will not change their minds if they aren't challenged in their thinking. Why wait for someone else to do that work? Whether it is in laying the groundwork for future change; standing up and being counted when it comes to values we care about; or supporting or opposing legislation, as international educators, you bring an authentic, informed, and passionate voice to the issues. You can make a difference. **IE**

MARLENE JOHNSON is executive director and CEO of NAFSA: Association of International Educators.

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