



The Rise of Senior International Officers

By Alan Dessoiff

THE EMERGENCE OF THE ROLE of senior international officer (SIO) at colleges and universities across the United States underscores the growing emphasis that institutions, both public and private, are placing on internationalization. Although titles for the position vary from one campus to another, the basic concept is the same: an individual at a high level of institutional leadership who heads an office dedicated to internationalizing the broad scope of the institution's programs and activities.

On some campuses, the role is not new. At Michigan State University (MSU), there has been a dean of international studies and programs since 1956, when then-President John Hanna created the position to reflect MSU's involvement in U.S. government-funded projects to build universities abroad and turn them over to the host countries, says Jeffrey M. Riedinger, who has held the post since 2007. It has broadened over the last 50 years to cover just about everything on campus with an international element.

At many institutions, the position of SIO seems to have developed in the 1990s, "when internationalization was first starting to gain some traction on campuses," says James P. Cross, who spent much of that decade as associate vice president for global education at Heidelberg College and now is associate provost and senior international officer at Champlain College.

The provost of Indiana University created the position of associate vice president of international affairs 15 or 20 years ago, according to Susan Buck Sutton, who holds it now. "There were a lot of different international activities on the campus and they needed coordination. They also realized that if we were going to move to the next level of international activity, there needed to be dedicated full-time leadership taking us there," says Sutton, who also is associate vice chancellor of international affairs at Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis.

The SIO is a newer position on some campuses. It was created four years ago at the University of Minnesota

after a strategic planning task force called for raising the university's profile as an international institution and insisted that a dean lead the effort. Following a national search, the job went to Meredith M. McQuaid, who had been associate dean for administration and international programs at Minnesota's Law School, where she earlier earned a law degree that followed an undergraduate linguistics degree. Now she is the university's SIO as associate vice president and dean of the Office of International Programs.

At Haverford College, the role of SIO was never officially created, but Donna Mancini, dean of global affairs (and who has been running the study abroad office for 20 years), fills the role on campus. The process of taking on the SIO-type responsibilities started in 2003, when the provost asked her to create an ad hoc committee to consider travel policies to protect the health and safety of students, faculty, and staff who traveled abroad.

Like her peers at some other institutions, especially small liberal arts colleges, Mancini has other unrelated responsibilities other than serving as the SIO without that exact title. "At small colleges, you usually wear several hats," says Mancini. Asked how she balances the two assignments, she responds, "creatively."

Why It's Important

Whatever its job title, most institutions see their SIO filling a vital role. At Portland State University, "it's a recognition by university leadership that international matters are of critical importance to us, both intellectually and in terms of our vision," says Gil Latz, who has been vice provost for international affairs since 2002.

"We live in a highly interdependent world and the need to expose ourselves to complex international questions is greater than it has ever been. I think the academy is responding, if not leading, in creating that kind of understanding. That's the primary reason

for the emergence of this kind of position," Latz asserts.

"It's absolutely necessary to have a global focus today to complete our overall mission, but it won't happen through inertia. You have to put leadership in place to execute this critical element of leadership," adds Barry Morris, director of cabinet strategic projects and also executive director of the Institute for Global Initiatives at Kennesaw State University.

McQuaid, picturing her university as a wheel, says for too long its Office of International Programs was "on the rim" but now "we are moving toward the hub." Her job title helps because she says "I am system wide. I oversee all five campuses and as dean, I connect with the deans of the academic units."

The importance of the role has local dimensions as well, particularly for community colleges like Gadsden State Community College in Alabama. More than 300 international companies have located facilities in the state since 1999, including a large

Many Paths to Becoming an SIO

Most SIOs have either academic or administrative backgrounds, or both, in international education and recommend those routes for other educators who might aspire to become SIOs. "It's very difficult to rise to the level of SIO at a major university without having academic experience and credentials," says John Hudzik, vice president for global engagement and strategic projects at Michigan State University. "If I were hiring, I probably would look for a candidate who had been at the rank of professor," adds James Cross, associate provost and senior international officer at Champlain College.

"If you're going to claim to be knowledgeable about the world, you have to pursue work or research that is global, and have the experience of the world," agrees Gil Latz, vice provost for international affairs at Portland State University. But it's also important, he adds, to "balance your career with administrative skills."

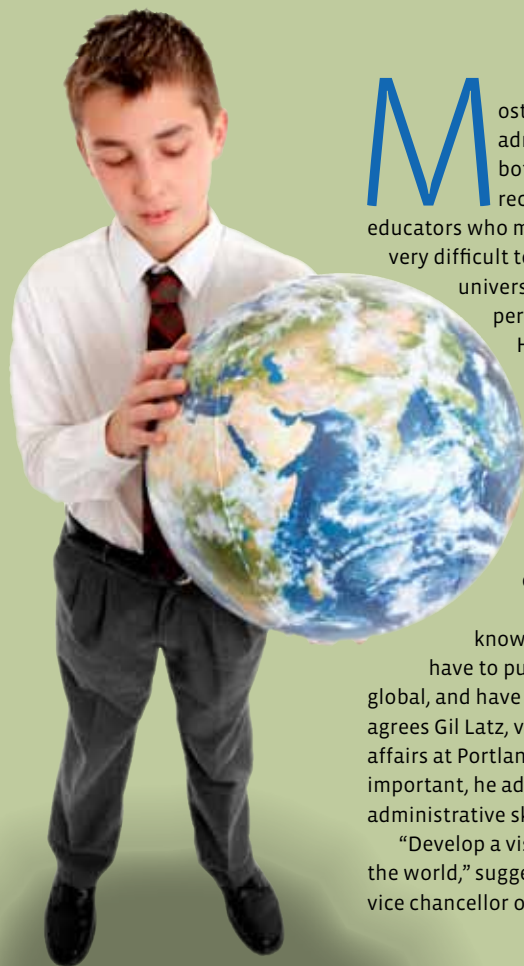
"Develop a vision of why this is important in the world," suggests Susan Buck Sutton, associate vice chancellor of international affairs at Indiana

University Purdue University Indianapolis and associate vice president of international affairs at Indiana University, "so that when you have a thousand meetings to go to, you can articulate it to people, including ornery folks like me."

Sometimes it's possible to reach the SIO level by a less traditional route. Barry Morris, director of cabinet strategic projects and also executive director of the Institute for Global Initiatives at Kennesaw State University, spent most of his early career in international banking. "I'm not your typical academic type," he acknowledges. He left banking to earn master's and doctorate degrees in international relations "not with the intention of becoming involved in academia, but just to pursue knowledge. It was an intellectual pursuit," he says.

That was consistent with an ambition that began in his childhood in a small town in Louisiana. "I always wanted to understand the world," he says, relating how he looked at a globe when he was a little boy. "I stayed up for hours turning that globe, and wondering why I had to stay on one little dot when there were all those other little dots. I wondered what those other dots were," he says.

Now he knows what those dots are, and like other SIOs, his job is to help his institution connect with them and recognize that it is part of a great big globe out there.





Honda plant 30 miles from Gadsden State's main campus. Now students representing 51 countries attend the college and an estimated 45,000 Hispanics live within 50 miles, reports Paula Ross Derrick, coordinator of international programs since 2005.

The principal international activity at Gadsden State previously was teaching English as a second language, which Derrick did herself for more than 20 years, but now she wants to do more, including sending Gadsden students abroad. "There's a whole world out there and our students have got to know more about its cultures and how it works," she says. "It used to be that we just tried to produce good citizens. Now we have to produce global citizens."

But she acknowledges it will take some doing. "You'd be surprised by how many people don't even know we're here," she says. "We've just been this sort of odd little group off to the side. People say 'oh, they take care of those foreign students.' But the whole face of our area is changing and if I have to, I'm going to pull this school and Etowah County and the state into the international arena kicking and screaming."

Goals and Challenges

To fulfill their responsibilities, SIOs have set goals. "We are goal driven," says Sutton. The plan at IUPUI fundamentally revolves around creation of strategic international partnerships with universities abroad "that then can become the hub for all kinds of international activities, from student learning to faculty research to civic engagement," Sutton says. So the goal in the next few years is to "enhance the strategic partnerships we have and develop a few additional ones."

Cross's immediate goal at Champlain College is to increase the number of students studying abroad from about 100 now to 300. A priority at Portland State is to increase the number of students coming from abroad from the current 6 percent of the student population to 8 percent. A broader goal, Latz says, is to "define what global learning means" for Portland State students. "It's not just for international studies majors but for all students. In as many majors as possible,

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we want to make sure they graduate with a sense of the complexity of the world they are going to work in," he explains.

Similarly at Minnesota, McQuaid says one of her goals is to press the university's leadership and the deans across every department to "define what they mean" by becoming international. "We say we want to produce globally competent students, but what does that mean? We want to have a presence around the world, but why? What kind of presence?" Like many other universities, "we have tactics but don't have a strategy," says McQuaid, who sees her role as

an "implementer, forcing the conversation and then implementing whatever strategy the university wants to come to."

At Michigan State, Riedinger seeks a way to enhance area studies centers as "intellectual hubs in terms of catalyzing and facilitating the coming together of faculty across colleges to look at some of the world's big problems" through expanded faculty research opportunities. He adds that MSU still is emphasizing education abroad but following a task force report, "we're looking at program quality and cost and most importantly, the alignment of the programs we offer with the research priorities of the departments and colleges."

SIOs agree that achieving their goals often presents challenges and hurdles to overcome. "First and foremost, it's money," says Latz. It helps, SIOs say, to "spread the awareness," as Sutton puts it, of what they are trying to do and gain the support they need to do it.



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"I think a lot of people understand what study abroad is and also appreciate having international students on the campus. But as part of the institutional mission and a larger goal of internationalization, they are not very well understood," Sutton explains. "So one of the biggest challenges is to get people to understand how they fit with that, how it could be exciting to them. It's a challenge of education and persuasion simultaneously."

Importance of Allies

SIOs also agree that it is critical to have campus allies, starting with the strong support and advocacy of presidents, provosts, and deans, and most SIOs say they have that. Still, they say, some key faculty and others often need convincing. "For some, this isn't part of their agenda, or not nearly as important on their agenda as it is on mine," says Riedinger.



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"We are an omery bunch," asserts Sutton, a faculty member herself "in my spare time" as chancellor's professor of anthropology.

"There are, understandably, some faculty in some programs who believe they are doing just fine without any central coordination, and maybe they are. Sometimes faculty and even whole programs are defensive about their own international activities. Those are issues I certainly would like to discuss with them, to see if there might be something more they could be doing."

At California State University Channel Islands, "many of our faculty are foreign-born, so that's helpful," says Mayumi Kowta, associate director of the Center for International Affairs. Still, "there are some departments that are concerned about having international students on an official level." When she started in her job in 2008, there were only seven international graduate students and no undergraduates, although the campus is now making a not universally supported effort to bring them in, Kowta says.



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Student advisers also have to be brought on board, Sutton and other SIOs agree. “You have to become really good friends with the advisers and be sure they buy into the value of an international experience for the students,” says Cross. At IUPUI, “there was a tendency for advisers to think only of study abroad, and only for certain kinds of students, and only in their junior year,” Sutton says. Now, “we spend a lot of time with the advisers, particularly the ones who meet all the incoming new students. We give presentations on the full range of international possibilities for students and on getting the advisers themselves involved in international activities. We have brought them on board, but it was a process of several years.”

Current SIOs and others who have held the position cite lessons learned from their experiences. John K. Hudzik, vice president for global engagement and strategic projects at Michigan State, who earlier held the position Riedinger now has, says he often was asked what authority he had. “My response was that I had no authority, I only had influence, if I could figure out how to exercise it. You are successful not by making people do things, but rather by influencing their patterns of behavior and desires and wishes, and that’s a matter of building good, strong relationships.” Adds Riedinger: “For people who like positional authority, our model is the wrong model.”

A lesson he has learned, says Morris, is that “you can never overestimate the importance of communication” to educate people about internationalization and foster their participation in it. On the other side of the coin, “you need to be a good listener and be sensitive to the different perspectives and needs of constituents on campus,” says Cross.

“A lot of it is building social capital,” adds McQuaid. “I tell my staff, ‘you to go to any committee or reception that invites you because you can make one more connection that way, and until you are value added, there is no point in demanding a seat at the table.’”

For new SIOs whose familiarity with the job might be limited, professional development helps. “I did it on my own, seat of the pants,” says Sutton. “In the first month, I attended any conference that sounded like it

might be relevant. I hit some winners and losers, but gradually I found the professional organizations that were the right ones, including NAFSA, AIEA, and ACE, and started soaking up everything I could from them.”

As SIOs gain a foothold on more campuses, Hudzik cautions that they and their institutions should not necessarily expect immediate results. “Internationalization is not something that happens in a day or a

year,” he says, referring to Michigan State’s more than 50 years of experience with the position. “You have to have a long-term institutional commitment to it to get it bred into the ethos of the university.” **IE**

ALAN DESSOFF is an independent journalist in Bethesda, Maryland. His last article for *IE* was “Biometrics—So Far, So Good” in the September/October 2009 issue.



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