

By Karen Doss Bowman

# Sustaining Vitality and Resilience

## Ravi Shankar Begins His Term as President and Chair of NAFSA's Board of Directors with a Commitment to All Members

*A longtime advocate for professionalism in the field of international education, Ravi Shankar has been involved with NAFSA for more than 2 decades. Most recently, he served as vice president for professional development and engagement on the NAFSA Board of Directors, but his experience as a member-leader began with service as a community college representative for Region V. Other roles include International Student and Scholar Services Knowledge Community (KC ISSS) representative; regulatory representative; Region V chair; member of the Membership Committee; chair of the NAFSA task force on online case management tool (now called IssueNet); member of NAFSA's Diversity Statement Task Force; and member-at-large and chair of the Leadership Development Committee.*

*Shankar hopes NAFSA can leverage its influence to advocate for more welcoming U.S. immigration policies, help the United States maintain its status as a top destination for international students, encourage more U.S. students to study abroad, and promote greater innovation in international education.*

*As director of the Northwestern University International Office—a position he has held since September 2001—Shankar oversees a program that supports around 4,000 international students and 1,600 visiting scholars. His specialty areas include intercultural communication, program development, and nonimmigrant regulation.*

### **You were born in India, grew up in England, and also lived in Kenya for some time. How did those early international experiences shape and prepare you for work with international students today?**

I spent my formative years in England. These experiences really shaped my worldview [and] provided different perspectives, actions, and words beyond tolerance, empathy, and sensitivity to the issues and challenges that international students face.

### **What kind of experience did you have as an international student?**

My time at the School for International Training [SIT, now called the SIT Graduate Institute], was a rather interesting juxtaposition considering [its location] in Brattleboro, Vermont. At that time, this was a small town of 13,000 people, pretty homogeneous except for the pocket of globalism on top of the hill that was SIT. Because of my background [being educated in England and India], I had no issues with acculturation or culture shock. But the experiential education—which is the crux of what SIT does—was very new after coming through a very traditional pedagogical framework.

Having to go through experiential education was pretty jarring, to say the least, because it was actually a process to get used to that. But I think I've since really embraced experiential education as a way to look at teaching and any experience because it's an approach that addresses different pedagogical needs and different learning styles.

The graduate student demographic at that time at SIT—this was in the early 1980s—had a very intercultural composition. So there were students from all over the world. It became a very comfortable environment to be in. When I look back at that experience and think about [how much more] we do for students now, there's no comparison.

### **How did your career path lead you to the field of international education?**

As many of the new international education professionals are doing now, I didn't come into the field by having a PhD in academia or an advanced degree in international education. My career path really was rather convoluted in the sense that my early studies had been in English literature. Later, I pursued graduate work in

Ravi Shankar, President and Chair of NAFSA's Board of Directors, has worked in the field of international education for more than 20 years.



management and organizational development. When I was doing that, I got interested in intercultural communication, as well as intercultural management, as they used to call it at that point. That's what really grew my interest in the field.

I was planning to apply to work in the socioeconomic development field in the early 1980s, at the height of debate about development aid and the politics of donor nations versus beneficiaries. So I was considering this [question of], "Who am I to tell somebody that they needed something when they didn't?" And I always remembered what my grandfather used to tell me in terms of development: "If it rains in the West, we'll unfurl our umbrellas in the East 20 years later."

My grandfather's thinking was tongue-in-cheek—partly based on the lack of development, but also based on whether appropriate technology and development philosophy were the guidelines adopted by the Indian government soon after independence. India had adopted the Soviet model of five-year planning, and

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there was an imbalance of state control and private enterprise. So, the question—and his saying—was both a commentary and a criticism.

It had a prevailing influence on how I saw development and the politics of it. Take, for example, massive industrialization: Does this make sense to a developing country without the necessary infrastructure? Further, [living] in Kenya, for example, I remember my father—who was a consultant to the East African Power and Lighting Company—bemoaning the fact that funds

from the International Monetary Fund and other Western countries [were] funding thermal power generation in areas where there were no natural resources to do so. So, I essentially turned what my grandfather used to say and flipped it to look at development from a different perspective.

As I was thinking more about this [philosophy] while finishing my studies in the Program in Intercultural Management at SIT, the school offered me a position as coordinator of student services. That job incorporated international students, and that's how I got started. So not by design, but quite by accident, just as many of my peers sort of fell into this field.

**What are you most excited about as you step into the role of president and chair of the NAFSA Board of Directors?**

I'm excited as well as nervous. It's a fairly big responsibility, but I'm excited about a few things. One is, I think we're at a very interesting point in terms of not only the association, but also the current [political and social] environment in which we see some hostility toward international students and international education—or for that matter, hostility toward anything that is different.

So how do we continue to be strong and resilient in our advocacy efforts through public policy? NAFSA is the leader—the preeminent leader—in the field of international education, so how can we become even stronger, even more resilient, in public policy?

An exciting strategy is working with other organizations that operate in the same or similar landscape that NAFSA does, identifying what responsibilities we have as an association and to collaborate and coalesce with other associations that share our values [can help us all attain our] goals of public policy.

I've come [to this new role] through grassroots, member-leader positions with NAFSA—Region V chair, Leadership Development Committee chair, and a number of different task forces. We've had a lot of discussions about our commitment to providing services that really are innovative, time sensitive, and relevant to what's going on in the world around us.

We really are taking a very hard look at how we continue to be relevant to the field [of international education] and to our members. We are evaluating what kinds of products and services we deliver and the framework under which we are delivering them. And related to

that is [finding the best ways to] sustain the vitality and energy of our volunteer leadership and of the members themselves. I think that's exciting.

**What do you see as some of the biggest challenges to international education today?**

I think [the political climate] is one of the biggest challenges today because that really impacts the association in a lot of different ways. As student enrollment continues to decrease in the United States, that has an impact on our member institutions—which then has direct bearing for the association. How does the association keep ahead and abreast of this? And then the other challenge to international education in the United States really is the increasing number of students going to other countries, particularly Canada and China.

I recently listened to a piece on National Public Radio talking about how China has been—due to its commitment to development of science and technology—attracting more and more researchers from different countries.

Similarly, as more and more non-English-speaking countries develop their higher education infrastructure and develop the ability to deliver programs in English, I think [the United States] is steadily losing market share from some really myopic vision. And of course, you have the continued budget cuts of institutions—particularly at state institutions—where the cost of providing services is being passed on to students. So how do we make sure we're not looking at the international student and international education as commodities?

And the challenges in international education are not only about incoming international students. We also face challenges for our study abroad programs in terms of how we get more students to go abroad. How do we make it possible so that more U.S. students can afford to study abroad? How can our institutions finance study abroad—particularly for those first-generation, low-income students? It becomes a diversity and inclusion issue.

**How can NAFSA help meet these challenges?**

I think that NAFSA has to be nimble and responsive to the constantly changing environment. That's where innovation and relevance come in. But foremost, how do we continually advocate through public policy efforts? NAFSA does just an absolutely brilliant job at this. But how do we make those efforts even stronger?

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**What are some trends in international education that you see emerging in 2019, your first year as president?**

I think one of the biggest trends is the decrease in international student enrollment in the United States. The increased competition from other countries is going to be something that we're going to have to continue to deal with—not only as an association, but also as individual institutions.

And then another challenge will be dealing with the [federal] regulatory issues that this current administration seems to kind of throw out whenever they feel like. I think those are the two biggest things.

**What are the strengths of NAFSA, and how can the organization build on them?**

I think one strength of NAFSA really is in the area of public policy. I'm impressed with the efforts of [the public policy] group—they are working on bringing attention to the value of international students and the value of study abroad experiences.

I think NAFSA's strength also lies in the kind of content that is developed by member-leaders in all of the knowledge communities and the professional composition of the content that's delivered through publications, through training, through workshops [and other avenues]. Those are some of the biggest strengths for NAFSA.

**You have previously served NAFSA's board as vice president of professional development and engagement. How can the resources and expertise available through NAFSA support the training and development of international education professionals?**

The short answer to this is that there isn't another association in this space that designs and delivers [the quality of] programs, workshops, and materials that NAFSA does to train international education professionals. Further, NAFSA's public policy work is the key to ensuring that international education is critical to the United

States. The data speak for themselves with international education being the fifth largest sector, contributing \$39 billion dollars to the U.S. economy. The training professionalizes the quality of programs and sets standards of practice and ethical principles. It provides theoretical framework, best practice, and guidance.

**How can members become involved with NAFSA or more actively involved? Why is it important that we tap into that expertise?**

Over the last few years, NAFSA has become a rather strategic association, with a rather unique structure that involves member-leaders really delivering the strategic goals in partnership with NAFSA staff. The content—the expertise—lies within members, but the shaping of that content is really guided by staff. There is a professionalism around it. We get input from members [and staff members], and it really informs the work of the board.

Therefore, member-leaders are very, very critical to the association and the kind of work that we do. There are a number of ways that members can get involved in NAFSA, whether at the regional level or at the national level. There are so many different opportunities for them to really get involved.

**Any final comments on your vision for NAFSA moving forward?**

It's really critical for us to continue our commitment to providing professional services that are innovative and time sensitive through public policy and through inter-association collaboration, and by sustaining the vitality and energy of member-leaders. The NAFSA Board of Directors is terrific, consisting of outstanding leaders from various fields, different disciplines, and different institutions. That group is a rich source, particularly in terms of building diversity and inclusion with our member-leader network.

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