

By John D. Heyl and Danny Damron

Should I Stay or Should I Go?

Career Dilemmas for International Educators

WHETHER someone is a Senior International Officer (SIO), a study abroad or international student services director, or a staff member early in his or her career, sooner or later all will ask: Should I stay or should I go? The real question, said one SIO recently, is (in poker lingo): “When to hold ‘em? When to fold ‘em”?

International educators—like all middle managers—would prefer clear and unambiguous answers to these questions. International educators know, however, that work in academic institutions and internationally relevant organizations is rarely that simple. In the real world of international education, opportunities, like professional advancement or a chance to take part in building a new program, and challenges such as burn out, senior leadership changes, professional relationship issues, and administrative realignment all complicate the responses to these questions.

Navigating the tension between competing pressures and priorities can put anyone in an “emotional bubble,” insulated from more rational decision making. Drawing on others’ experiences can help clarify one’s best options when confronting the prospect of leaving an institution. These perspectives can help create a stronger understanding of both opportunity and cost and a greater confidence in one’s ultimate decision.

Positive Factors, Negative Factors

The main positive factor shaping a decision to leave one position for another is, of course, the desire to acquire greater responsibility, for example, at a larger or more prestigious institution, with a more comprehensive administrative portfolio, with a stronger track record for supporting internationalization, innovation and upward mobility, with a more authoritative title, or for higher salary and better benefits. Another positive factor shaping that decision might be an opportunity to build and develop a commitment to internationalization that is new to an institution. These are all good reasons for a professional move.

Non-work elements may also come into play; family and personal issues must always be attended to in ways that support a healthy work-life balance. Some feel the need to relocate closer to aging parents in ill health or to

end a cross-country commute. Others decide to move with a partner who has taken a job offer elsewhere. Conversely, asking a partner to give up a position he or she loves may lead to remaining in one’s current position. Finally, some see leaving a job behind as a way to create more time and space for family and other non-work interests.

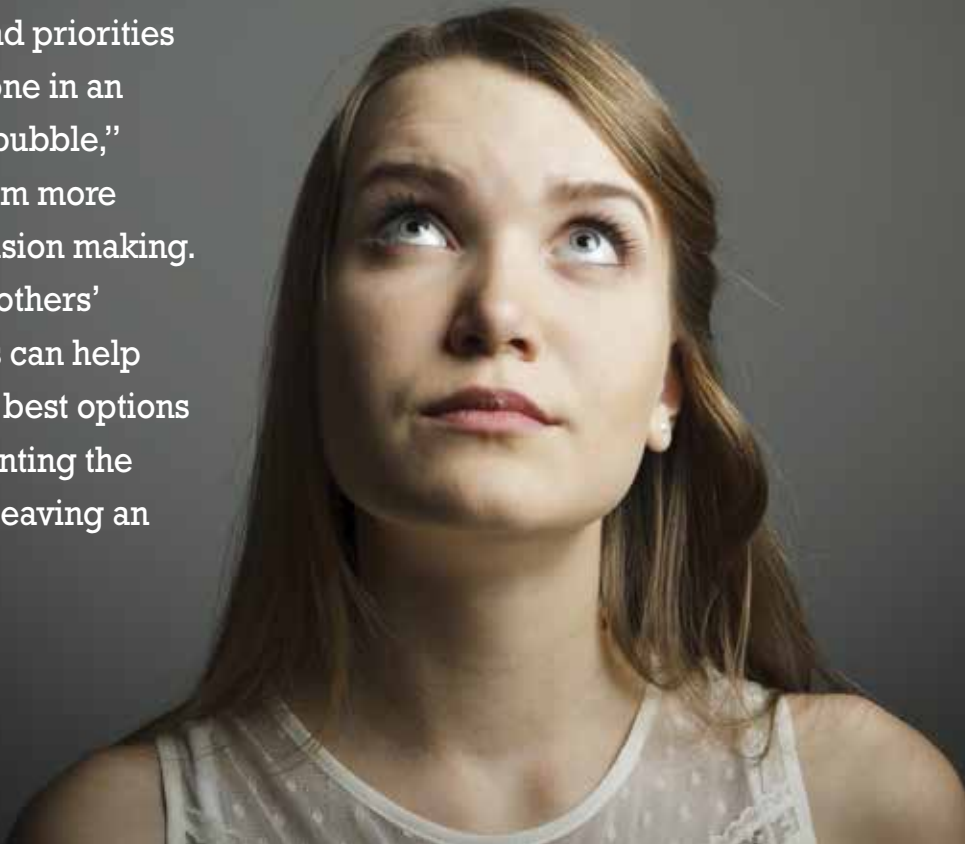
But there are also a host of negative factors encountered in less than ideal circumstances, which include the following:

■ **Institutional/management burn out.** An extended career at one institution has its benefits, but it also has its costs. Inevitably, we all see the limits of our ability to contribute to internationalization efforts. Turnover in senior leadership often forces a “reboot” of one strategic plan after another. SIOs report that senior leadership changes are a virtual constant at large, public universities, making a long-term internationalization vision difficult to sustain. Staff turnover, likewise, can lead to management burnout from the continuous hiring, training, and evaluating/disciplining staff. Trying to find a place for staff “dumped” on an international office can further stifle professional momentum. Sometimes international educators just want to start over with a clean slate.

■ **Relationship issues.** Like all middle managers, SIOs do not hire their own bosses (the president, provost or vice provost). Likewise, other international education administrators and staff may have little say about whom they work for. Yet these relationships are critical in developing and supporting a shared vision for internationalization and for mobilizing resources to make it happen. When these relationships go awry and detract from one’s ability to make positive contributions, international educators often consider seeking a new setting in which their work



Navigating the tension between competing pressures and priorities can put anyone in an “emotional bubble,” insulated from more rational decision making. Drawing on others’ experiences can help clarify one’s best options when confronting the prospect of leaving an institution.



is more appreciated and recognized. One SIO reports that when his well-entrenched boss stopped reading his policy communications—as became apparent in their monthly meetings—he knew it was time to look elsewhere.

■ **Administrative realignment.** Of particular interest in the current campus climate of budget constraints, senior administrators look for ways to combine portfolios and reduce administrative costs and direct reports. This tends to push international education—and the SIO role—down the administrative organization chart. For example, on most campuses in the California State University (CSU) system, the international portfolio has moved under Outreach, Continuing or Extended Education, sometimes eliminating the SIO position altogether—or locating it in a position with multiple responsibilities of which international is only one and often a secondary one at that. Other realignments may be even more challenging when they aren’t based on true complementarities in vision and role.

■ **Risk issues.** International initiatives can involve considerable risk (approving international travel to unsafe areas of the world, financially and administratively overextending the institution through poorly vetted international partnerships, discounting health or safety advice, etc.), sometimes risks that are not fully understood by non-specialists. A pattern of high-risk decisions by senior administrators, despite warnings by the SIO, may mean that exit is a prudent choice. The opposite may also make exit an option worth considering; a senior administrator’s overly risk-averse approach may limit innovative program development and thus inhibit broader internationalization. One former SIO noted that his provost always took legal counsel’s (uninformed) advice on new international initiatives, which hindered virtually all innovation.

■ **Legal and ethical issues.** In performing their duties, international education administrators and staff may experience or witness legally or ethically questionable

behavior and practice. Those behaviors and practices include sexual harassment, verbal abuse, bullying, violations of international student visa requirements, and a number of other situations. When the individuals or units engaging in these behaviors or practices are protected rather than punished, or when calling out those behaviors and

practices puts one at risk, exit becomes imperative. One SIO reported seeing a valued staff member punished for making a well-documented claim of sexual harassment against a colleague in the international office. This should be a wake up call for anyone to consider leaving his or her position and institution.

■ **Credibility issues.** Under continuing budget constraints at colleges and universities, senior administrators may ask if a \$100,000+ position is needed to manage what is still not recognized as a discipline or even a well-defined field, but more a service office with certain visa or exchange knowledge. For these reasons, they come to feel that anyone should be able to “do” international education and shift the international portfolio under someone unfamiliar with the field. Similarly, administrators sometimes see retirement or departure of international education staff as an opportunity to reduce costs by leaving the vacated position open and increasing the responsibilities of the remaining staff.

At a personal level, these positive and negative factors make the decision to leave an emotionally charged one. We may be convinced that moving on is the best decision if we want to grow professionally. We may also struggle to quiet doubts that leaving is just a concession to failure, that “I can turn this around” if I stay a little longer. We may worry that we are unrealistic in our expectation that the “grass will be greener” somewhere else. Institutional fit, although it can be a bit amorphous and impressionistic, is always important. Several SIOs recently acknowledge to us that, even with a loftier title and wider responsibilities, they would not consider the grass to be greener at a smaller and more insular institution.

Strategies for Assessing One’s Options

In light of these factors, how might international educators effectively assess their situation, balance emotion and rationality, and make a decision that maintains or enhances their professional momentum? One approach is to create time and space away from the pressures of the position and assess the decision. This will likely bring additional options to light; staying or leaving can be informed by questions about improving the current situation, discovering (or denying) that the situation isn’t as grave as it appears, carefully considering the short- and



SIMPLED
Recruiting in India
Made Simple

Join the SimpleD partnership model

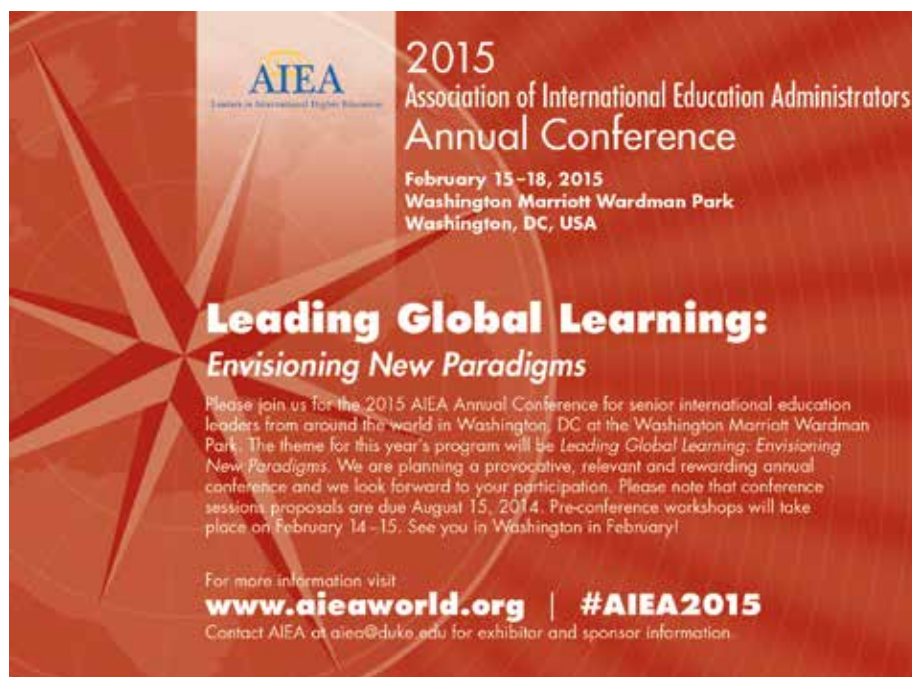
- Network of high schools & resources in India
- Weekly webinars & dynamic social media presence
- Establish your physical presence in India
- Be part of our uniquely designed recruiting tours

Our team members have extensive experience working with international students & working in higher education institutions in the U.S.

OUR VALUES
We offer all our services free of cost to our students. We do not work on commission and always provide ethical & accurate advising.

SimpleD is a social for-profit enterprise founded by US based International Educators who wanted to address the current challenges of recruiting from India. SimpleD strives to provide students & universities a trust worthy partner that works towards the best interest of students and universities alike.

www.SimpleDinternational.com



AIEA
Association of International Education Administrators

2015
Association of International Education Administrators
Annual Conference

February 15-18, 2015
Washington Marriott Wardman Park
Washington, DC, USA

**Leading Global Learning:
Envisioning New Paradigms**

Please join us for the 2015 AIEA Annual Conference for senior international education leaders from around the world in Washington, DC at the Washington Marriott Wardman Park. The theme for this year’s program will be *Leading Global Learning: Envisioning New Paradigms*. We are planning a provocative, relevant and rewarding annual conference and we look forward to your participation. Please note that conference sessions proposals are due August 15, 2014. Pre-conference workshops will take place on February 14-15. See you in Washington in February!

For more information visit
www.aieaworld.org | **#AIEA2015**
Contact AIEA at aiea@duke.edu for exhibitor and sponsor information.

Having a job offer for a new position in hand makes the decision to leave much easier. When negative factors combine or accelerate, however, one may not have the luxury of “holding on” to wait for more favorable times, especially when staying may impact one’s health and well-being.

long-term implications (professional and personal) of a job move, and even outlining a process timeline for the departure.

This space can also lead to greater self-awareness, a key to success in one’s present position as well as to better evaluate one’s reasons for leaving it. Are your current professional skills, knowledge, and experience being utilized in your current job, and are your career aspirations being fulfilled? For any passionate international educator, there will always be a gap between present realities and future goals. The question becomes: What is the best course of action to close that gap?

Some have also suggested creating a “solutions document,” identifying and assessing current challenges and possible solutions and examining the risks of leaving. In most cases, after all, there are as many good reasons for staying in a position as for leaving it. Sharing your thinking with a mentor—a fellow international educator or a trusted colleague at your institution or in a related field—may further clarify the factors informing your decision.

Having a job offer for a new position in hand makes the decision to leave much easier. When negative factors combine or accelerate, however, one may not have the

luxury of “holding on” to wait for more favorable times, especially when staying may impact one’s health and well-being.

In the end, a decision to depart will always bring a certain level of risk. Understanding and carefully examining the context will inform the decision in ways that will better contribute to positive professional momentum and hopefully more fulfilling work. **IE**

JOHN D. HEYL is an international education consultant and founder of www.IELeaders.net. **DANNY DAMRON** is an international internship consultant at Brigham Young University in the College of Humanities.

Fayetteville: A great college town in the heartland of the USA with friendly people and gracious hospitality!



University Admissions

- Conditional admissions
- Comprehensive University with Bachelor’s, Master’s and Ph.D. Programs
- Successful completion of the Intensive English Program meets U of A English proficiency requirements
- Low tuition & low cost of living
- Safe, friendly campus & community surrounded by the great natural beauty of the Ozark Mountains
- Scholarships available

Intensive English Program at Spring International Language Center

- Six levels of instruction
- 25 hours of class a week
- Small classes
- Academic & test preparation
- Study in January, March, June, July, August or October
- Dedicated, experienced, full-time faculty with Master’s degrees
- Fully accredited by both CEA and ACCET

Student Services

- Airport pick-up service & housing assistance
- Homestay, Campus Residence Halls and Apartment placement
- Conversation Partner Program
- Immigration advising
- Educational, social, cultural & sports activities
- Access to all campus facilities
- Friendly, personal attention