

By Elizabeth Hendley

A Steadfast Commitment

Even with the threat of terrorism looming across Nigeria, Margee Ensign's commitment to education—for her students and for those displaced by conflict—never wavered.

Margee Ensign, president of Dickinson College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, grew up traveling with her parents who worked in the airline industry. Even at a young age, she was “fascinated and curious about different places, different languages, different people, different cultures,” she says. After working at both Columbia University and Tulane University in an international affairs capacity, Ensign became dean of the school of international affairs at University of the Pacific. In 2010, Ensign moved to Yola, Nigeria, to become president of American University of Nigeria (AUN).

During her tenure as president, AUN faced the threat of Boko Haram activity in the area. AUN admitted former captives of the terrorist group as students on campus—a move Ensign repeated several years later after she moved back to the United States to become president at Dickinson. Faculty, staff, and students at AUN became heavily involved with meeting the needs of the local community in Yola, which was overwhelmed with refugees and orphans as Boko Haram terrorized the country. Throughout it all, Ensign remained steadfast in her commitment to providing a safe educational space for all the students at AUN.

What led you to the job at American University of Nigeria?

I took the position [at AUN] because, as I'm fond of saying, Nigeria will be the third largest country in the world—overtaking the United States—by about [year] 2045, 2050. The opportunity to have an impact in this important country where American-style education was not well known, and in what is arguably one of the poorest parts of the world, northeast Nigeria—that's why I took it. And it was an incredible experience.

The experience was not without some challenges, most notably the Boko Haram threat. As president at AUN, what was your biggest challenge during that time?

It was peace and security, simply. [Boko Haram] arose in Maiduguri, which is a town not that far north of [AUN] in a different state. We had to build our own security and intelligence network. Keeping students safe is the primary responsibility of every administrator, whether it's elementary school through college.

I'm also a big believer in trying to build peace strategies. How do you counter these people not just with hard security, but with strategies that keep people, especially young people, from joining terrorist groups? The university established the Adamawa Peace Initiative, which brought together all the Muslim leaders, all the Christian leaders, and the one NGO in town. We sat together and



Margee Ensign

said, “How do we keep the peace? What can we do?” They identified vulnerable children as the group we should work with. Community members identified those young people, and the university designed many programs for them.

The Feed and Read [program], which became critically important as we got more and more refugees into the town, was a meal a day cooked by local women—so they could have some income—and [AUN] students teaching the kids how to read. During the height of the crisis, we had about 30,000 orphans, and [we] put them



Margee Ensign talks with students at Dickinson College during her open office hours. “We have an obligation to prepare our students to understand the world they currently live in and the world that’s coming,” says Ensign.

all in Feed and Read. We had 300,000 refugees move to town. Peace Through Sports was probably one of the most important. It expanded into a huge program for boys and girls, men and women, using sports to train them in peace and tolerance. There was a curriculum designed by our faculty and staff. Keeping education going was really important. My students wrote apps in local languages.

My big worries there for three years [were] keeping the campus safe, always assessing whether we really had to evacuate, communicating with parents literally every night for two years, and keeping innovative education going.

That’s a giant challenge—keeping university operations running amid threatening circumstances, while including students in peacebuilding efforts in the community. On a larger scale, what do you see as the role of international education in global peace and diplomacy?

One of the reasons I came to Dickinson is because of what [Founding Father] Benjamin Rush said in 1783. Our job is to educate and engage citizens for a new democracy. For me, that still really resonates—not only in terms of democracy in the United States, but around the world as we face these enormous, perhaps unprecedented challenges.

Our job as educators is to prepare young people to not only understand the world that we currently live in, but the one that’s around the corner. When you can give young people the opportunity to solve big problems like [at AUN], education changes quite dramatically. We were hyperaware on campus that the stakes were high and that every moment of learning mattered. Because part of [the students’] responsibility was to take what [they] were learning out in the community and help other people.

We have a big job nationally and internationally to make sure that young people are prepared. The world they will live in is very different from what we are seeing now. Three of the top 10

countries in the world by population will be African. We don’t do a lot of study abroad to countries in Africa. We are not well educated on the rich diversity, history, and culture. That’s another role, to make sure young Americans have the global education—not just in places like Europe, but in Latin America, Asia, and Africa. If we are to be preparing global leaders in the United States, there’s nothing like going overseas and studying. There’s no substitute for learning about a place and then going to visit and study there.

What needs to happen in order for more American students to study abroad across Africa?

We have to have leaders of study abroad organizations who know what these countries are like and where students can study, and then [build] partnerships all over. It’s such a huge continent. North Africa is so different from East Africa, which is fundamentally different from West Africa and South Africa. People setting up these programs have to have that knowledge, and that comes from not just traveling, but [having] people ... in those positions who can develop the partnerships first. We’ve got a long way to go in terms of building up that expertise.

For African students coming to the United States to study, how can institutions best integrate them into campus life, academic life, and the local community?

We are talking about the second biggest continent in the world. Students from individual countries will have different challenges. So first, recognizing that. They’re not just from Africa, they’re from Kenya or Morocco. When they’re at the university or college, [it’s important] to make sure that people there, from student life to the academic side, have an appreciation for their country, their culture, and their history. That’s fundamental. We shouldn’t be talking about “African students”—we don’t talk about “European students,” right? And then having [the students] being involved in

QUICK QUESTIONS

that educational process is really important—valuing the knowledge they’re bringing to an American college and university.

What do you see as the benefits to having a strong international presence on campus, for both domestic and international students? What have your internationalization efforts at Dickinson entailed?

One thing I’ve seen since coming home [from Nigeria] is that colleges and universities are making great efforts to make sure their campuses are diverse—as it should be, because we know that learning and decisionmaking are always better when we count in different perspectives. But I don’t think all of us have done the best job in ensuring that when we are this diverse, we know how to deal with difference. We’ve launched a big campuswide intercultural initiative, where eventually faculty, staff, students, and the board will take the Intercultural Development Inventory,

which is a self-assessment of having to deal with differences. So each of us understands, “How do we see the world? How do we deal with difference?” And then have the ability to begin bridging the gaps in this country, which are profound.

That’s a big part of our role; not just making sure we have people on our campuses from different backgrounds, but that we can deal in a positive way and understand and appreciate what those differences bring to our life, our learning, and our campuses. We’re all willing. We have diverse populations, but do we have the knowledge and tools to deal with it?

Around the world, the number of refugees and at-risk migrants continues to rise. The conflict in Syria alone has produced almost an entire generation of young people who have never been to school. What is higher education’s role in supporting refugees and at-risk populations?

Two things. First, we have an obligation to prepare our students to understand the world they currently live in and the world that’s coming, to have the knowledge and skills to understand it, and hopefully the ability to imagine new futures and create new solutions to these big global issues they will face.

There are significant numbers of people driven out [of their communities] by climate change. That’s a part of Boko Haram—the rains failed. I’m not saying that’s the whole thing, but the rains [in northeastern Nigeria] failed for three years. When you live in a part of the world where agriculture is rain-fed and not [irrigated], you’re going to have lots of problems, including famine and refugees. People are moving, and then terrorist groups rise in that toxic mix. We will see more and more people crossing borders to try to have decent lives for themselves and their families. It’ll be a big issue that the next generation will really have to deal with. They have to understand what that means, what’s driving it, and how to solve it.

I would love to see every [U.S.] college and university, in addition to committing to [our] students in the United States, commit to young people from around the world who also deserve to have an education. It’s hard to do, because of the funding and visa and other issues. But I also found that it really can change the climate on that campus. When [U.S. students] realize these young people are refugees and have experienced traumas we don’t want to think about—how committed they are, not only to an education for themselves, but an education that will allow them to go home and be leaders in their own countries. I’m not going to say others have a moral obligation to do this, but we have a moral obligation to make sure our students fully understand the world they’re living in and will lead in the future.

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The bridge program you created at Dickinson has made progress on this front. How can other institutions learn from what you’ve done?

The bridge program is designed for young people whose education has been disrupted by conflict, violence, or humanitarian disaster, who can benefit the most from an American education. America has been a place where these young people have come, and much of it used to be funded by the U.S. government. Of course, that commitment has ended. Do we as educators have any need to continue this [commitment]? I think absolutely. It goes back to making sure our students can study and live and work with people from all over the world.

All of these issues are intertwined, and much of your work has been at the intersection of international education and international development. How do you see these two fields overlapping, and what can international educators learn from the professions in the development field?

I think there's a variety of intersections. International development is one of the most interdisciplinary fields in the world. You can't understand it unless you understand economics, policy, anthropology, [and] history. That approach to understanding a development issue or problem is invaluable for any educator to see. We can't really afford to be in our individual silos [in order] to understand the world.

International educators have to understand not just the parts of the world where we have been sending students and learning about, which is primarily Eurocentric. It's our responsibility to make sure students learn about and study abroad in places around the world that we haven't been focused [on] as much—in Latin America, Asia, and Africa. I see that's a stretch for some now, and they worry about safety and security, and of course those are genuine worries. But if

you have international educators who are well versed and knowledgeable about these places and these countries, then they know where to put students. That's part of the responsibility—make sure that we are better educated ourselves about many other places in the world.

What sort of professional development can international educators pursue to work toward these goals?

I think every international educator has to have an international background themselves. To be knowledgeable and credible, making sure that those who are guiding and advising our students have the background needed to advise wisely. There's no substitute for going to a place and learning firsthand about the people, culture, languages, and history. I think we've got to have a much stronger push as international educators, as much as we can, to get out ourselves. ■



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