

# Facing the Recurring Challenge of Xenophobia

By Esther D. Brimmer, DPhil





## NAFSA Executive Director and CEO Esther D. Brimmer, DPhil, explores why international education and exchange is more critical than ever in today's geopolitical landscape.

**W**E LIVE IN AN ERA of political upheaval in many countries. Among the various political themes swirling in the world today, one of the most pernicious for international education is the return of nationalist, xenophobic rhetoric. In navigating these changing dynamics, a closer examination of the bases of different policies can help educators to focus their efforts. It is critical for anyone working in the field of international education to better understand the background and implications of the current geopolitical environment.

Blasts from competing visions of the future are buffeting international education. As the world faces major changes wrought by globalization, automation, climate change, demographic shifts, and other trends, people look for ways to cope within this new landscape. They make political choices, accept employment options, select academic majors, and make other decisions that are guided by their understandings of their prospects.

These understandings may be based on fundamentally different models of the world, and those different models can shape how policymakers, voters, host families, neighbors, and others see international students and scholars—and international education in general. Yet, the work of international educators forges the bonds and skills that can help people navigate this more turbulent future.

### **Creating a Better Future Together**

The competing visions can be categorized into different models. One such model, the internationalist model, acknowledges these major global disruptions and presents a more integrated world as a solution. In this model, people work together across borders to manage the impact of economic change and to mitigate the effects of large, interdisciplinary issues like climate change. Working with others is seen as part of the approach to building a better future. Diversity and inclusion are considered strengths because they promote fairness and engage a wider range of people in finding innovative solutions. Correspondingly, societies respond to change not by avoiding it, but by investing in shared mechanisms to cope, such as education and retraining, research, and supportive infrastructure to create the jobs of the future. In this model, the exchange of goods and services and the movement of people and ideas are considered to be beneficial and important.

In the internationalist model, countries and people agree on rules and conflict resolution process to manage their relationships. The rule of law, and equality before the law, are crucial tenets of the system. Conflict exists, but countries try to use nonviolent means such as compensation or sanctions to resolve disputes. There may be the need to use military force, but such use is guided by notions of legitimacy and proportionality.

This model has been part of international affairs for three centuries. These concepts guided the ideals of the international system built after World War II and

became more widely accepted after the end of the cold war. In the context of this model, international relations can be mutually beneficial. The powerful participate not for selfless, altruistic reasons, but for benevolent ones based on mutual (if asymmetric) advantages. For example, when crafting the post-World War II world, wise leaders in the United States and elsewhere understood that a system that was good for others could incentivize them to acquiesce to structures that were also beneficial to the United States. International affairs were not a zero-sum game; mutual benefit was possible. Building connections among people through diplomacy, commerce, and international education helped people develop those mutual benefits.

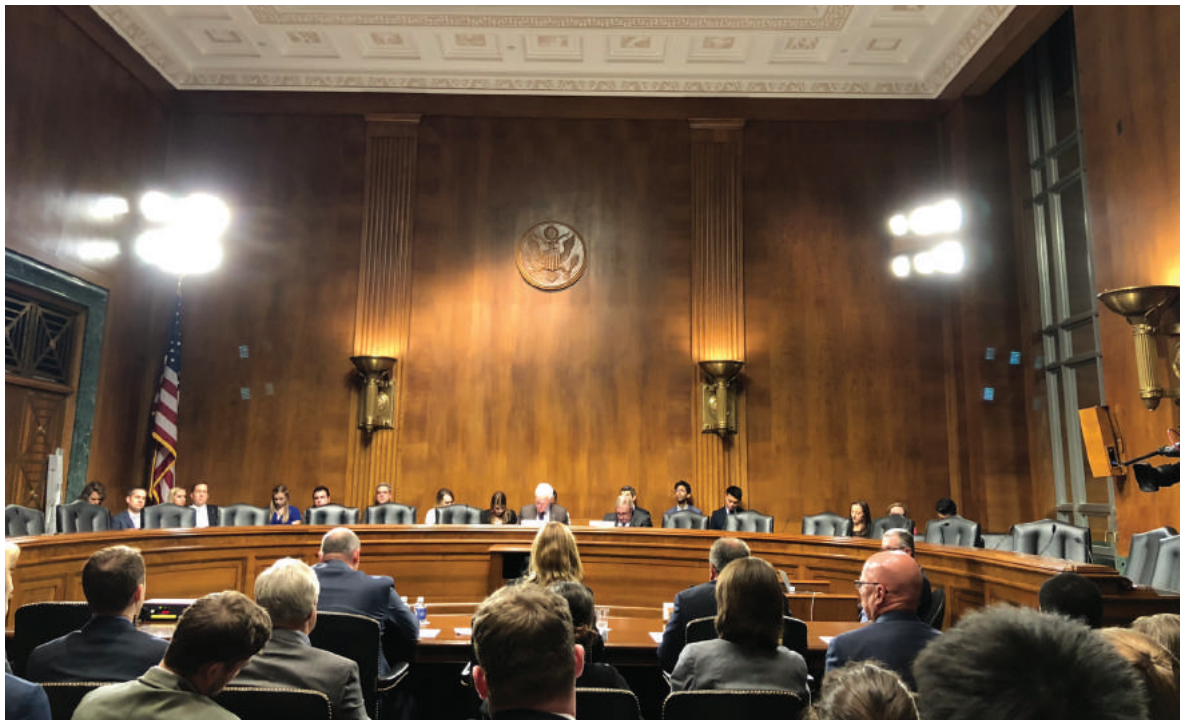
Today, the internationalist model is under strain but can still provide the principles from which people can fashion a better future together. In this model, policymakers champion the hard decisions that underpin strong cooperation and a solid foundation for international order. Concurrently, citizens accept the responsibility to be informed participants in their societies. Internationalization at home contributes to that informed citizenry by bringing good ideas from around the world into classrooms and communities.

## Exclusive Models

Despite the benefits and promise of the internationalist model, there are alternative models of the world that are also leading decisionmaking and thought processes.

The great power model sees the world as determined by military power and rivalries among countries. Cooperation is unnatural and temporary. This vision venerates the state and sovereignty. Powerful states will be in contention with each other, but such conflicts can be orderly and governed by rules. This model largely conceives of international politics as a zero-sum game in which one country's gain must be another's loss. Adherents to the great power model may still support international education because they see acquiring knowledge as beneficial to building a strong country.

The third model, the nationalist model, focuses on ethnic or other personal attributes and fosters an "us versus them" mentality that goes beyond even the realm of politics. In some cases, "us" might be other compatriots; in other cases, "us" might mean one ethnic group. This nationalist model is skeptical of cooperation, believing such solidarity to be possible only among people who are similar. The world outside the group is seen as malevolent, with foreigners as potentially dangerous



In June 2018, Jill Welch, NAFSA deputy executive director for public policy, testified before a U.S. Senate subcommittee on the importance of international education.

and the exchange of people and ideas risky. People outside of the country are possible threats, or at least something to be managed, instead of being considered as long-term assets.

In this model, when a crisis erupts, a common reflex is to close ranks and cut off outside connections. This line of thinking tends to become more prominent during times of great economic and social stress, which can lead to a breakdown of the democratic system. Examples of this type of response have been seen throughout history. The devastating impact of the 1929 U.S. stock market crash, and the protectionist policies that followed, deepened the Great Depression. During the 1930s, authoritarians elsewhere in the world rose to power by promising easy solutions and pointing to purported enemies. The social changes experienced after World War I, combined with increased economic vulnerability, made many people hunger for stability, even at the cost of civil liberties.

The nationalist model has reappeared in many parts of the world. The 2008–09 economic collapse had a huge, lingering impact in many countries, which has been a contributing factor to the rise in the nationalist model. The crisis exacerbated economic changes that would have happened anyway. In today's market, emerging economies are becoming more competitive with various sectors in advanced economies. Susceptibility to the nationalist model is partially a reaction to this robust global competition and other economic changes.

## Effects on the Field and International Students

The divergence of models is not a partisan one. There are internationalists, great power advocates, and nationalists in both major U.S. political parties. For decades, support for international education has been a bipartisan phenomenon—and it still is. As evident from the June 6, 2018, hearing at which NAFSA Deputy Executive Director for Public Policy Jill Welch testified before the Senate Judiciary Subcommittee on Border Security and Immigration, both Democrats and Republicans agreed on the importance of protecting international education and the flow of students and scholars to the United States.

These three models permeate politics and have far-reaching implications for international education. The first, the internationalist model, sees international

### AT A GLANCE

## Internationalist Model

- A more integrated world is the solution to global disruptions.
- Working with others is part of the approach to building a better future.
- Diversity and inclusion are strengths.
- Rule of law and equality before the law are crucial.

### AT A GLANCE

## Great Power Model

- The world is determined by military power and rivalries among countries.
- Sovereignty of states is prized above all else.
- Conflicts can be orderly and governed by rules.

### AT A GLANCE

## Nationalist Model

- A focus on ethnic and other personal attributes creates “us versus them” mentality.
- Cooperation is viewed with skepticism.
- Outsiders are seen as potentially dangerous and threatening.

education as a constructive element. International education enhances the ability of people to operate in this world by increasing familiarity with other places and developing the ability to work with many different types of people.

The great power model may often downplay the actions of individuals and social trends, such as the movement of students and scholars. Yet, this second model can also support international education as a mechanism to build the country's human capital. Over the decades, U.S. policymakers from both the internationalist and great power schools of thought have supported international education. Both understood that international education is an important part of diplomacy that can bring countries closer together.



## NAFSA's Strategic Plan



OVER ITS 70-YEAR HISTORY, NAFSA has spoken on behalf of students who were being vilified based on their country of origin. As we work to defend the values underlying our Strategic Plan, we are especially attentive to nationalism and xenophobia, because these themes underpin many of the efforts to close the United States and make it less welcoming.

The sixth goal in NAFSA's Strategic Plan states that we will "Deepen and broaden NAFSA's engagement with individuals and groups whose work contributes to the success of international education, through mutually beneficial collaboration." To rise to this goal, we work with groups that focus on immigration and find common interests with those who seek a fairer society in which all are treated with respect.

*Read NAFSA's Strategic Plan, which was updated earlier this year, at [bit.ly/NAFSAsstrategicplan](http://bit.ly/NAFSAsstrategicplan).*



The third model, the nationalist model, is wary of outsiders, including international students. Among the three, this model is the most damaging to international education. Adherents to this model are doubtful of the benefits of international exchange programs and are ready to forestall the arrival of international students based on whatever crisis happens to be looming at the time. Throughout history, international students have been targeted for political opprobrium in the United States—following the Iranian revolution, after 9/11, and today.

The consequences of nationalistic rhetoric are further compounded because the latest version of xenophobia turns on international students and scholars, even though they make an important contribution to classrooms and communities. International educators need to be aware of what they see transpiring in their own countries, as well as remain alert to the fact that universities will often be targets of nationalism because they foster critical thinking, which is fundamental to democracy. Campuses can be places where different types of people learn to coexist—a wonderful place from the point of view of international educators, but threatening to ardent xenophobes.

### Our Role in Navigating the Future

What should we as international educators do? First, we can continue to do what we do well. Our daily work facilitating international education helps the United States and other countries remain open and welcoming. We can keep the channels of communication open at a time when there are those who want to close them down. We can foster the open exchange of people and ideas, hear what people want to say, and encourage people to learn new languages so they can read and hear what is being said around the world.

We can speak up for the role of universities as places that welcome different people and ideas and promote cross-cultural dialogue and experiences. We can push back against old stereotypes endorsed by nationalists. NAFSA and other education-focused organizations continue to defend the benefits of international education in the face of nationalism and xenophobia through collaborative work and advocacy efforts.

Sometimes, life comes full circle. When I was an international student studying in the United Kingdom, I wrote my doctoral dissertation on four different schools of international relations theory. At that time, I focused on theories related to the individual (human rights), the state (great power), the nation (nationalism), and the economic class (socialism and other theories). I find that as we seek to bring order out of chaos, recalling such enduring concepts provides valuable guideposts. ■

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### Suggested Action for Educators

A few ideas to help promote cross-cultural understanding on campuses:

- Establish community dialogues
- Celebrate holidays from other cultures
- Incorporate other departments in International Education Week events
- Host cultural film festivals
- Advocate for inclusionary policies (find more at [bit.ly/NAFSAadvocate](http://bit.ly/NAFSAadvocate))