

Trends & Insights

NAFSA: ASSOCIATION OF INTERNATIONAL EDUCATORS

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Connecting the Dots Between DEI and Higher Education Internationalization

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Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) are crucial to modern human existence—in essence, we all experience and approach interactions differently based on our own various identities, biases, and personal backgrounds, which is a critical aspect to international education and internationalization efforts. Looking beyond individual experiences, international educators tend to be particularly sensitive to how DEI is approached on every campus, in each organization, and across various cities and countries. While many campuses may focus DEI initiatives on local or domestic understandings of diversity, global issues related to all three aspects of DEI and the importance of overcoming the global/local binary perspective may not be included in the necessary discussions.

Although the synergy between DEI and internationalization has largely been implicit for many international educators drawn to the field, recent events have made it more imperative to have DEI embedded more explicitly for greater impact, relevance, and cultural awareness with both domestic and international populations.

As a follow-up to the discussion explored at the [NAFSA Diversity and Internationalization Summit](#) held in February 2022 (the recording of which is now available to all NAFSA members), I sat down with six respected leaders and interviewed them in institutional pairs (i.e., senior international officers and chief diversity officers)—Hilary Landorf, PhD, and El pagnier Hudson, MS, at Florida International University (FIU); Hilary Kahn, PhD, and Khalilah Shabazz, PhD, at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI); and Joanna Regulska, PhD, and Renetta Tull, PhD, at the University of California–Davis (UC Davis)—to talk to them about how to effectively collaborate and deliver on initiatives connecting DEI, internationalization, and international education (IE) at their respective institutions. There are three main lessons for international educators and (potential) partners to keep in mind: the words we use are important; it is critical to

engage multiple stakeholder voices in bridging the gaps between IE and DEI; and we need to be open to different approaches in order to gain the necessary support for these collaborative endeavors.

OUR WORDS MATTER

The field of IE (and higher education in general) includes many concepts that require definition to be understood, implemented, and assessed (e.g., internationalization, global learning, social justice, multiculturalism, etc.). Diversity, for instance, may be used in reference to gender, race, ethnicity, age, (dis)ability, socioeconomic status, language, political affiliation, religion, sexual orientation, etc. It is important to acknowledge that national, regional, and local definitions and legal protections for diversity and inclusion are not standardized or equally understood. There are a wide variety of definitions being used for the same terms which can cause confusion as the same words are used to mean different things. Some terms specific to DEI and internationalization are used internally by individual departments and staff while others are used externally on university websites and in marketing materials. However, the debate between

whether exact definitions or shared concepts are more important is ongoing. “It doesn’t matter what definition I give or terms we use, people are going to interpret it their own way,” affirms Shabazz. The alternate view can be summarized equally succinctly by Hudson as, “Knowing the correct terminology is foundational to meaningful dialogue and meaningful exchange.”

It is important to recognize that while international educators may increase their understanding of different concepts by collaborating with DEI professionals, the influence of personal background and perspective will affect how this work is approached. Ultimately, using shared language is important for ensuring both effective communication and inclusive participation in exchanges. The topic of shared language can also be used to kickstart conversations. Especially considering DEI work, international educators need to consider that terms are shaped by cultural practices and understandings are affected by how terms are used globally. Regulska asserts, “Institutions will use the words and have different meanings, shaped by their cultural practices. We don’t want to use language imposed by others, but it should be embedded in our practices.” Beyond the importance of the language being used in these efforts, international educators and campus leaders need to consider the level of commitment given to connecting IE and DEI work on college and university campuses and communities.

ENGAGING STAKEHOLDER VOICES

Higher education institutions come in many shapes and sizes, from community colleges to research-intensive institutions, with a range of resources and access to different audiences and stakeholders. In order to successfully translate important concepts and effectively involve necessary diverse voices in the dialogue, multiple conversations need to take place with and across individual DEI and IE units at higher education institutions and communities to include departmental leaders, special guests, campus leadership, students, and the wider community. Beyond casting a wide net, it is critical to think about why we want to do this work and who to engage. As Hudson proclaims, “If we continue to do what we’ve always done, we’ll get what we’ve always gotten. Bringing other voices to the table doesn’t create extra work, but opportunities to inform and make the experience more holistic.”

In some cases, efforts to make the connections between DEI and internationalization need to start with departmental leaders who can help connect with other conversations. Special guests may be invited to high level meetings in order to start involvement (e.g., experts and centers for teaching and learning, institutes for engaged learning, multicultural affairs, academic affairs, and student affairs, among others). In other cases, it starts with campus leadership and academic units. Tull recommends, “The incumbent leadership needs to be brought into a welcoming environment from the beginning. ...Some of the other outreach happens automatically but you also need to remember your internationalization or DEI colleagues.” Whether going from top-down or bottom-up, bringing practitioners and scholars together, building relationships, and finding synergies can assist greatly in meeting strategic goals and connecting with institutional mission beyond distinct initiatives. “Buy-in sounds different when internationalization speaks about DEI or when DEI talks about internationalization. You need to have another champion to use your language, philosophy, etc. but framing it differently to build new connections that are so important,” as Regulska intones.

It is also important to engage students and consider a wider scope of campus leadership roles (e.g., student, faculty, staff) to normalize this work. Shabazz states, “The very first stakeholder that comes to my mind are the students... I want to graduate our students whole and ‘wholeness’ is inclusive of broadening their perspectives to be able to conscientiously acknowledge our entire world and not be limited to where they are.” Domestic students need to be aware of global issues and international students can do better when they understand more about the cultural context into which they find themselves and where they may go in future. Landorf reiterates the importance of including student voices in this work as, “Students are the reason we are in higher education—the heart of the enterprise—and they can distinguish between superficial and deep efforts.” Students, staff, and other stakeholders can see through aspirational rhetoric and want more than affirmative words on a website.

Beyond the confines of campuses, DEI and IE professionals can involve members of the wider community who hold different viewpoints and experiences that can contribute to these important conversations. The broader K-12 educational pipeline may also be consulted and involved to combat global

DEI issues that lead to widening gaps among diverse groups in higher education communities. As Kahn reminds us, “I don’t think we’re doing enough outreach and they’re dealing with the same issues and, in some ways, are under the microscope even more. ...You need to have a multiscalar, multiprong approach.”

GAINING SUPPORT

In circumstances where international educators need to gain support from different stakeholders, it is key to consider what will be most effective in communicating the importance of connecting IE and DEI work—“Whether evidence, ammunition, or motivation, whatever you need to reach and support change... Take the time to talk about the things that impact us,” as declared by Shabazz. Landorf corroborates this sentiment as, “Need to show leadership that the two areas [IE and DEI] are essential to fulfilling our fundamental purpose of higher education—production and exchange of new information. We have similar goals and values—ensuring everyone in the community has a voice, that voice is heard, every person feels fulfilled, and we feel a sense of belonging.” For some decisionmakers, international educators may need to present narratives with compelling stories that humanize the data; for others, statistical evidence or impact data are required to gain support. In either case, translating the required information necessitates bringing awareness to circumstances or situations affecting different populations in various places, whether local or further afield. Once individuals and groups are aware of and interested in the circumstances of others, then the work may turn to a deeper form of advocacy by going beyond introductions to basic concepts to further providing support or additional resources for students, administrative staff, and faculty members.

INSIGHTS

Based on my conversations with these experts, there are three main takeaways for international educators to collaborate effectively to promote IE and DEI initiatives in their own context:

- **Highlight champions.** Remember the importance of bringing in different voices and work together to get the important issues brought up among different audiences. While you are engaged in conversations, others may be advocating for you so be intentional about cross-pollinating ideas and pulling in relevant individuals to advance the work.

- **Embed the work.** It is more difficult to gain support from others if it seems tangential to the primary purpose or mission. However, once DEI and IE are connected and intentionally brought into the respective conversations, these synergies may build into extraordinary efforts that can benefit everyone.

- **Be a safe space.** IE and DEI programs and initiatives encourage individuals to become vulnerable, address personal biases, and break out past their comfort zone. How the specific issues are approached and addressed will affect the response, whether positive or negative. In teaching others, we may be taught in return.

NEXT STEPS

Connecting DEI and IE efforts is not just something that would be nice to do on college and university campuses. It is imperative. Senior international officers and chief diversity officers are in key positions to make this happen. Having champions in a counterparts’ office opens more conversations and opportunities for collaboration rather than creating more work. The examples from FIU, IUPUI, and UC Davis provide useful models for others to consider implementing on their campuses. The work needs to be done, so involving additional voices amplifies this work and extends its impact to serve institutional missions and goals. International educators and institutional/departmental leaders can think about how best to approach these relationships in their own context and ask the relevant questions to start the dialogue.

At some campuses, there may be more or less support to connect DEI and IE efforts at the institution through staff or faculty discussions. One method, embraced at UC Davis, is to have regular discussions in order to embed these connections into every aspect of the respective work and make these kinds of connections more normalized or “automatic” rather than forced. In another model, at IUPUI, leaders model behavior and encourage involvement and concern along with requiring professional development in these areas for faculty and staff. At FIU, staff complete self-reflections, read a common text to build understanding, and complete an audit of practices and procedures to identify gaps and reflect on issues of DEI and IE in respective spaces. Going further, a taskforce may be brought together to develop specific recommendations for the institution, along with resources and infusing DEI and IE in policies and practices.

All students (domestic and international), administrative staff, and teaching faculty need to feel safe and that they belong at the institution. Individuals that build a greater consciousness by being aware of their own biases can curtail cultural ignorance and microaggressions. Institutions that work to make the necessary synergies between diversity and internationalization efforts are more capable of making relationships more transformational than transactional—making campuses truly global and inclusive.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

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El pagnier Hudson, MS, is the vice provost of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) and the senior vice president for the Division of Human Resources at FIU.

Hilary Kahn, PhD, is the associate vice chancellor for international affairs at IUPUI and associate vice president for international affairs at Indiana University.

Hilary Landorf, PhD, is associate professor and executive director of global learning initiatives at FIU.

Joanna Regulaska, PhD, is the vice provost and dean of global affairs, and a professor of gender, sexuality and women's studies at UC Davis. She is also the vice president for public policy and practice on the NAFSA Board of Directors.

Khalilah Shabazz, PhD, is the assistant vice chancellor for student diversity, equity and inclusion at IUPUI.

Renetta Tull, PhD, is the vice chancellor of diversity, equity and inclusion at UC Davis.



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