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Environmental Sustainability and Internationalization: Challenges and Opportunities

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We have dealt with crises before: terrorism, a global financial crisis, racial injustice, and two years of a global pandemic, to name a recent few. The irreparable harm being done to the planet has been rapidly accelerating for the past 150 years, yet a burning planet touches every social and economic aspect of society. It is time for the field of international education to acknowledge the environmental crisis as a priority. Within this multifaceted, multigenerational, and largely human-caused crisis (i.e., anthropogenic), international educators must do our part to counter the effects by embracing the powerful position we are in, as educators with unique access to the world.

As we enter the second half of 2022, and on the heels of the 2021 United Nations Climate Change Conference held in Glasgow, Scotland, known as COP26, the field of international education can no longer afford to approach environmental, and subsequently related social, sustainability as a “specialized,” “add-on,” or “niche” endeavor. Institutions and organizations have begun incorporating more sustainable strategies, programs, and general practices into their operations. However, elective, piecemeal approaches largely championed by a select few on individual campuses or within organizations do not address the expediency with which international higher education needs to deploy. Successfully embedding sustainability within campus internationalization efforts is not a task that can be achieved by a single committee, office, staff, or faculty member. For this piece, we primarily focus on the education abroad context and provide some critical implications for the field at large.

Luckily, there are already places to start these efforts. For example, a recent survey of sustainability performance in the field of education abroad shows that there has been a fairly slow integration of environmental or social sustainability into the foundational aspects of

study abroad programming and management (Bound International 2021). Specifically, the field is not actively measuring carbon emissions for students, faculty, or staff affiliated with education abroad. Of those surveyed, 22 percent of institutions or organizations specifically embed environmental sustainability into their organizational missions, goals, and objectives while even fewer utilize energy-efficient utilities, and most offices do not include the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), climate change, or sustainability in program titles or descriptions. These specific shortcomings can be focal points for action. Additionally, there are many other steps that we can take that do not require several hours of training, professional research, or education abroad staff with scientific backgrounds.

ALIGNMENT OF GOALS AND ACTIONS

As the recent *2021 Survey of Sustainability in Education Abroad* report shows, only 17 percent of institutions or organizations have environmental sustainability explicitly embedded into their organizational policies (Bound International 2021). This survey was primarily

completed by managers or directors of study abroad offices from 18 different countries, so the projection of environmental sustainability as a value or working pillar within study abroad likely has much room to improve. Many offices are hesitant to prioritize new investments or initiatives focused on sustainability among ongoing and heightened financial concerns, especially with the continued longevity of the pandemic.

With recent endeavors to engage in carbon offsetting, implementation of the SDGs, or pledges in carbon neutrality, international offices are more encouraged to visibly establish sustainability goals and, more importantly, draw direct connections between these pledges and specific activities. For example, offices and organizations can both create more sustainability-themed programs abroad as well as alter curricula to be more inclusive of sustainable perspectives, assignments, and dialogue (e.g., corporate social responsibility in business, biomimicry in engineering). Institutions could also include climate workshops and accounting mechanisms for emissions related to any type of academic travel. Predeparture and re-entry content may include the state of the crisis, how studying abroad both contributes to it through transportation and general consumption, and how it counters it in terms of firsthand witnessing, academic knowledge, research, and networking. Program partners can also be engaged in more sustainable ways (e.g., local hiring, crisis perspectives, impact programming). Finally, the SDG framework can act as a guide for not only academic endeavors but also financial, operational, staff development, and assessment endeavors. There are organizations and resources widely available to help offices and organizations get started on this, such as the [NAFSA Sustainability Special Interest Group \(SIG\)](#) and subject-matter experts with whom we work every single day (e.g., faculty). Below we outline several key issues and recommendations.

REFRAME THE NARRATIVE

Institutions, as well as study abroad provider organizations, have the opportunity to reframe the narrative around the value of a global education, especially among many competing priorities. Campus leaders are juggling a variety of contemporary issues such as plummeting enrollment, financial insecurity, visa challenges, and growing hesitancy around the value of a college degree to a generation that has experienced

several traumatic events. There is now an opportunity to rearticulate the value of higher education. Institutions can still achieve important objectives by affirming the value of global education, knowledge-sharing across borders, and the need to reconcile travel emissions with commitments to environmental sustainability.

There are mitigation strategies for international travel, but if international education is a priority and a platform for developing a high-performing workforce, other campus activities—perhaps in the form of various auxiliary services—could be reassessed as worthwhile mechanisms in which to achieve these critical objectives. As Ailsa Lamont recently stated, every single institution should factor in the carbon cost of its work and make the commitment to climate action a clear and central pillar of its strategy (NAFSA 2020–21 Senior Fellows 2021). Global education activity can take a similar approach: Make climate action clear and central in its offerings and branding. Senior leaders should stand firm on why global education remains a priority as well as how it will actually contribute to the gradual mitigation of the climate crisis’s effects. This includes the firsthand educational opportunity that education abroad affords students in providing access to resources and perspectives not easily available at home and the creation of environmental mindfulness for generations that will be inheriting our planet.

TRACK SCOPE 3 EMISSIONS

Scope 3 emissions “are the result of activities from assets not owned or controlled by the reporting organization, but that the organization indirectly impacts in its value chain” (EPA 2022). Institutions of higher education that are currently tracking Scope 3 emissions frequently measure things such as commuting, food systems, waste disposal systems, capital goods, and sometimes “business travel.” These are emissions that occur off campus or by external actors or agencies as a direct result of university activity. While the exact number is difficult to determine, several hundred higher education institutions are engaged in some type of Scope 3 emissions tracking (Bothwell 2021; AASHE 2021). Tracking is relatively easy because international offices and organizations frequently collect student, faculty, and accompanying staff flight information for risk management reasons, and customized programs already include some on-site ground transportation information. Unfortunately, academic travel is largely

not included in Scope 3 emissions tracking, either by education abroad offices or universities at large. The reasons for this are unclear but perhaps include a lack of accurate data (from lack of detailed flight plans per traveler) or a hesitancy to track what would no doubt amount to an abundance of travel emissions at a time when institutions have been making aggressive plans to become sustainable operations or to reach carbon neutrality between 2025 and 2040.

It is important to put forth an accurate profile of emissions data to set realistic goals. If campus internationalization, and particularly education abroad, is a priority for the institution, its emissions profile must be accurately generated and its value not skirted or undermined by the realities of its execution. Working with sustainability offices, officers or even external consultants can kick-start this important undertaking.

EMPLOY TECHNOLOGY TO SUPPLEMENT TRAVEL

If structured properly, technology can enhance global learning opportunities by

- providing peer-to-peer access across borders without the financial and environmental expense of travel;
- providing a dual modality for cross-cultural interaction for short-term study abroad programs that include a virtual classroom experience before or after;
- better preparing students for a longer experience abroad if they have already experienced online or courses similar to Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL); and
- enhancing virtual exchange when one or more participating students have already benefited with traveling and living abroad.

Technology is not a replacement for physical travel, but rather can be portrayed as a viable alternative to cultivate similar learning outcomes as well as an enhancement to the field itself. With only 2.5 percent of the world's tertiary student population traveling for study prior to the pandemic (UNESCO Institute for Statistics 2022), we must embrace the dexterity, creativity, and ability of technology to bring our students, our faculty, and their ideas together.

TAKE A COLLABORATIVE APPROACH

There is an opportunity for the field to redefine how crises are approached and solved. We are at a point where industry-wide actions can make substantial inroads toward making the field of international education more sustainable by prioritizing knowledge-sharing and industry-wide strategies. Larger associations, such as NAFSA or the Forum on Education Abroad, can lead the way in creating the platforms and frameworks to allow for this collaborative mindset to succeed and to implement best practices. This collaborative approach also exemplifies the leadership role that international educators must take within higher education structures. The Forum on Education Abroad's (2021) "Advancing the UN SDGs through Education Abroad" or the Climate Action Network for International Educators 2021 Forum are two examples of how the field is coming together in innovative, efficient, and impactful actions.

SET OBJECTIVES BEYOND SUSTAINABILITY

Regenerative approaches in many industries have the potential to radically change or restore ecosystems, economies, and societies; regenerative global learning and education abroad programs should also have these as objectives. Sustainability and regeneration are different, yet related: "Whereas sustainability means to withdraw or lessen in order to maintain a constant state, "regeneration" refers to "creating the conditions for life to continuously renew itself, to transcend into new forms and to flourish amid everchanging life conditions"" (Lee and Lundemo 2021).

Regenerative Study Abroad (RSA) has the potential to not only change students' perceptions and values but also to support social, economic, and environmental changes in the host community (Ponce-Taylor 2021). In this context, study abroad also has the potential to be an even larger contributor to the SDGs. RSA measures the social, environmental, and economic impact from design to implementation to evaluation, ultimately asking students if the program is mutually beneficial. Students can be challenged to reflect on this type of program's carbon footprint and how it transfers to their footprint back "home," specifically learning about how reduction and mitigation actions and strategies are being implemented in host communities.

Finally, incorporating sustainability-related topics and research into other, non-environmental- or non-sustainability-focused disciplines and curricula is key to ensuring this regenerative approach reaches all international education participants and institutions.

CONCLUSION

As international offices grapple with one of the most challenging times in the field's history, they must become adept at prioritizing these challenges and embrace a forward-thinking mindset, rather than just going back to pre-COVID-19 business as usual. The pandemic has pushed us to invigorate our risk management principles and procedures. The rise of globalization and proliferation of social media has elevated the need to develop intercultural competency. This threat to our existence—and co-existence—in the form of a rapidly warming planet in response to the demands of an active, consuming population must be met with the same determination. We need to double down on our commitment to embracing and respecting all that the world has to offer. This is not just in the form of consumerism typically associated with traveling abroad for study, work, or teaching but in preservation without sacrificing connectivity. It will require more than a handful of committees, a few motivated staff, or even a few inspired leaders. A holistic, collaborative, and multilateral approach is not just a recommendation—it is a necessity.

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NAFSA is the world's largest nonprofit association dedicated to international education and exchange. NAFSA's 10,000 members from more than 3,500 institutions in over 150 countries are administrators, advisers, instructors, students, advocates, volunteers, and all those committed to the growth of international education.

NAFSA encourages networking among professionals, convenes conferences and collaborative dialogues, and promotes research and knowledge creation to strengthen and serve the field. NAFSA leads the way in advocating for a better world through international education.



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