

Trends & Insights

NAFSA: ASSOCIATION OF INTERNATIONAL EDUCATORS

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Internationalization: Power, Policy, and Potential

BY DALE LAFLEUR, PhD

Internationalization is a process that offers higher education institutions the ability to recognize and influence the connections between local experiences and global needs. The recent global health pandemic, global social justice movements, and geopolitical power structures have given rise to questions about the future of higher education internationalization. Will students continue to study in other countries? How do internationalization and diversity efforts intersect? Will national policies and power structures around the world enhance or restrict the international collaboration needed to address global challenges?

These questions highlight a few of the pressing challenges facing international education leaders today. Navigating these challenges can be difficult and solutions will vary according to respective contexts. Responses are also heavily influenced by policies, practices, and power dynamics that are embedded in society. In the United States, current scholarship indicates that power dynamics are experienced locally, regionally, nationally and globally which plays a role in how internationalization is approached and implemented (Lee 2021). Experts offer insights on how U.S. higher education institutions are heavily influenced by global ranking indicators (Hazelkorn 2021); are bound by accreditation standards that outline what is considered quality international education (Blanco 2021); and construct internationalization strategies that emphasize their own interests (Mwangi, Chen, and Chinkondenii 2021). Many U.S. higher education institutions also rely heavily on student mobility as a commodity and to maintain a competitive advantage globally (Yao 2021) and depend upon early career international scholars, especially in the science and technology fields, to support the teaching, learning, and research enterprise (Cantwell 2021). Additionally, the pursuit of international partnerships that provide new opportunities for student recruitment and entrepreneurial pursuits have become the norm

(LaFleur 2021). In this complicated context, three recent trends influencing the internationalization of higher education stand out: the evolution of technology and communications, expansion of access, and using local solutions to solve global challenges.

UBIQUITOUS TECHNOLOGY

The modern generation of students, and those of the future, have been introduced to technology at an early age. The ease in which information can be accessed and communications can be shared online has transformed international higher education. The recent global health pandemic accelerated the need for higher education institutions to expand online learning offerings and utilize technology to continue daily operations in a condensed timeframe. This shift highlighted that there is a distinct difference in the ability to gain access to technology globally which exacerbated the global divide. The continued use of technology in international higher education however is here to stay. Infrastructure must meet current demands while innovating for the future. Institutions that invest in improving technology infrastructure and providing access to both hardware, software, and the internet will be better equipped to offer a variety of learning modalities and serve a more diverse range of students.

EXPANDING ACCESS

Access to higher education in the United States has evolved and expanded over time, but there is still progress to be made. To address this challenge, higher education institutions must first recognize their role to serve the broader humanity and then develop policies, practices, and programs that address the spectrum of student needs. This includes understanding human capital needs of society, financial and practical needs of students and their families, and needs of the faculty and staff that are employed by the institutions. Each of these audiences plays a critical role in overall success of higher education institutions. Campus stakeholders must advocate for systems and resources that develop a diverse generation of future leaders, researchers, teachers, and productive members of all facets of society. Miami Dade College (MDC), a 2021 NAFSA Simon Spotlight Award recipient, was recognized for its Educate Tomorrow Abroad program (West 2021). This program is designed to support homeless students and former foster youth through collaboration between the MDC Office of International Education and Educate Tomorrow at MDC, a campus-based program that supports students studying at one of the Miami Dade's eight campuses in southern Florida. Funding is received from a variety of donors, including a Title VI center at Florida International University and Delta Airlines, and provided to cover program costs for qualifying students. The goal of the program is to expand access to a population that would otherwise not be able to pursue an educational experience abroad. Expanding access to higher education through unique programs aims to address the social injustices that exist globally and offer admission to all who seek an opportunity to pursue higher level teaching and training.

LOCAL SOLUTIONS TO SOLVE GLOBAL CHALLENGES

Advancing discovery and innovation is rarely achieved in isolation. Working collaboratively and in coalition with other experts provides an opportunity to share information, review new data, and consider different perspectives. Support for collaborative international research provides an opportunity to advance discovery and innovation through the exchange of knowledge — this is crucial for addressing global challenges. Higher education institutions can contribute to solving both local and global challenges through the three pillars of teaching, research, and service. Updating curriculum, teaching modalities, and learning strategies can aid in educating and training current and future generations.

Research allows for the exchange of knowledge and advancing of discovery and innovation. And through engaging local communities, higher education institutions can better serve their needs and help to address the challenges they are facing. Northeastern University, a top research university and 2022 NAFSA Simon Spotlight Award recipient, was recognized for its efforts to expand a long-standing and successful co-op program to include global industry and research opportunities (West in press). Today, Northeastern partners with over 3,000 employers in more than 136 countries on all seven continents to offer experiential learning opportunities to students across all disciplines. To ensure access, students receive financial support through the President Global Scholarship based on need. Global challenges impact everyone and developing local solutions and sharing this expertise can help solve them.

These three trends highlight the fundamental purpose of higher education: to provide a modern learning environment to engage, train, and inspire current generations of students and to provide facilities for faculty, researchers, and scholars to discover innovative solutions to current challenges. This scholarly incubator allows for the expansion and exchange of knowledge and the development of research that has generated solutions to global challenges and supported advances across disciplines for centuries. Yet despite the unlimited potential of higher education institutions, they also suffer from challenges that stem from the neoliberal environment and power dynamics in which they are situated (Slaughter and Rhoades 2004; Lee 2021). Geographical and geopolitical boundaries create differentiated levels of access, imbalanced resource allocation, and an inability to collaborate and share information without restrictions. As a result, institutions have adopted entrepreneurial behaviors that allow them to stay competitive in a marketplace that is ever more saturated. The focus on revenue generation and advancing institutional global prestige has become a key part of the international education leader's portfolio (Lacy et al. 2022).

STRATEGIES TO MANAGE COMPLEXITY

- **Be comfortable with uncertainty and flexible in your approach.** The field of international higher education continues to experience uncertainty in response to evolving geopolitical relationships and national policies. Mobility and opportunities for collaboration will continue to be affected.

Being comfortable with uncertainty has become a necessary skill for international education leaders. Understanding your institution's key goals and objectives and being flexible with how best to achieve them in uncertain times can go a long way toward success. This may include shifting office structures, cross training employees, engaging new stakeholders, analyzing current practices for efficiency and safety, and staying abreast of current trends and forecasts for the future. Status quo may no longer be an acceptable approach. Flexibility is critical for the long-term success of international education leaders.

■ **Stay true to the mission and embrace new opportunities.** Having a clear understanding of the mission and culture of a higher education institution can serve as a guiding compass when considering new opportunities. This knowledge will assist international education leaders in their ability to develop a viable comprehensive internationalization strategy that supports the broader institutional mission. Embracing new opportunities can lead to short-term wins and may also result in long-term gains. Focusing on the role of higher education institutions as incubators of learning and discovery allows for a more innovative approach to advancing the teaching, learning, and research enterprise. Engaging new stakeholders and expanding the champions for internationalization at your institution will help build longer-term stability and embed internationalization in the framework of the institution.

■ **Innovate, engage, and build mutually beneficial partnerships.** Engaging and building reliable and mutually beneficial partnerships, internally and externally, locally and globally, provides an opportunity for the exploration of new and innovative research and the development of globally competent leaders of the future. Partnerships that support the institutional mission and culture will likely garner more support from leadership and receive the human and financial resources needed to pursue them. Recognizing and addressing power imbalances, logistical challenges, and cultural differences and expectations in the development of partnerships is critical for their overall success. And assessment is an important part of the partnership life cycle that provides critical information and data on progress and program outcomes (LaFleur 2021). The ability to develop successful partnerships is an essential skill for every international education leader.

CONCLUSION

Higher education institutions that are adjusting teaching and research paradigms to engage current technologies and diverse audiences, support and foster global research and training, and embrace mutually beneficial local and global partnerships are positioning themselves to endure this time of disruption, address challenges and injustices, and thrive in the years to come. International education leaders are integral in championing fair and equitable practices and policies, recruiting diverse student bodies, and developing mutually beneficial partnerships and designing programs that help develop more equitable global competencies and awareness needed for a socially responsible global citizenry. Now is the time to think critically and recognize the role of internationalization as a critical factor influencing not only higher education, but the future of humanity.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

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Dale LaFleur, PhD, is the senior director, academic affairs and internationalization at NAFSA: Association of International Educators. In this role, she leads the association's strategies to support global learning and higher education internationalization by producing, planning, and delivering programs, publications and services in collaboration with the knowledge communities for International Education Leadership and Teaching, Learning, and Scholarship.

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NAFSA: ASSOCIATION OF INTERNATIONAL EDUCATORS

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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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