

Roundtable: The Role of International Educators in a New Reality
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From political divides at home to geopolitical rifts with global powers like China, from student-visa headaches to economic slowdowns to a sense that internationalization is under siege even on many American college campuses, the current moment is a difficult one for international education. This hour-long roundtable focused less on the particular challenges facing international education — and higher education in general — and more on strategies for communicating its value.

Among the ideas shared:

Participants suggested that neither data nor personal stories alone can make the case for international education. The real power is weaving the two together to form a powerful narrative. Having longitudinal data is especially helpful because it paints a picture of the impact of international education over time, rather than at a single point, one attendee argued. Alumni can help make the case because they can demonstrate how international education made a difference in their lives and careers. Another attendee argued that it can be useful to have important constituencies see the effects first hand, such as through a program that brings refugee students into local public schools to share their stories.

The field needs better data about the broad impacts of international education, including how it affects vulnerable populations. People can be skeptical because they don't see how it benefits them. There needs to be better data about international education and low-income and rural students. That said, some participants said that international educators shouldn't look down or be hostile toward those who don't see its value. If educators treat those who disagree as inferior, it can create a backlash.

Supporters of international education should be proactive in making the case for it. Too often, one participant suggested, the field is in the position of responding to criticism or questioning. Rather than playing defense, international educators ought to take charge of the narrative and lay out the benefits and contributions of global education.

It can be valuable to talk about international education as a means, not an end. AIEA attendees see value in international education and the intercultural competencies it provides — but not everyone, on campus and off, does. So talk about internationalization in those terms, participants suggested. Listen to what employers say are the skills they value, and then demonstrate how international education provides or enhances those real-world, marketable skills. One attendee who worked at a research university said she framed internationalization as something that could further faculty members' research collaborations. Another said that when his college released impact statements international education didn't have to be in the headline, but in the fourth paragraph, illustrating how global collaboration can benefit his state.

It is more compelling when you can show alignment between what the international-education office does and how it helps meet goals of institution or the state.

Although this session occurred in mid-February, after COVID-19 had become widespread in China and cases had been reported in the United States, the infectious respiratory disease was not a major focus of the conversation. As one attendee said, "I thought there would be more discussion at this conference...I decided that people are frozen, not sure of what to do. Maybe it's too early, and we don't know yet what's going to happen."