

Voices Forum

Encouraging Courageous Conversations

Developing a culture of allyship on campus will equip students to become culturally competent leaders in a rapidly changing world.



From cultivating intentionality and practicing transformative learning to creating “brave spaces” and examining their own biases, international educators can help create a culture of allyship on their campuses. Illustration: Shutterstock

By [Carlise Womack Wynne, PhD](#), [Malaika Marable Serrano, MA](#) | September 9, 2020

As life has been disrupted by COVID-19, the process of enduring this crisis together has highlighted the best and worst aspects of the human spirit. The global pandemic has amplified uncertainty, fear, and anxiety about what the future holds and exposed systemic social inequalities.

Yet against the backdrop of this public health emergency and economic insecurity, we are witnessing worldwide demonstrations in support of racial justice, the LGBTQ+ community’s lifting up of Black voices during Pride, renewed energy in exercising voting rights, and other social movements.

As educators, we tend to use such events in human history to take inventory and reflect on society—reviewing how past generations handled similar circumstances, as well as comparing our own situations to those of others around the world who also face these challenges. We tend to seek answers to the questions that these reflections pose.

One of the most pressing and consuming of these topics is not a matter of public health, but of societal and structural health. As our students return to us—whether on campus or online—they are changed. They will have experienced events that could be traumatic, even transformative.

Their perspectives on race, identity, and social and economic inequality are different because their experience base is different. We must meet this inevitably altered student body, and their needs, as they come to us with many questions and few answers. We must help them synthesize their experiences and transform themselves into culturally competent, educated leaders who have a reflexively responsive nature.

In using this opportunity to crystalize our institutional priorities and capitalize on our students' willingness to promote change, there are several concepts and frameworks that can enable this enthusiasm to lead to sustainable action and change. From cultivating intentionality and practicing transformative learning to creating “brave spaces” and examining their own biases, international educators can help create a culture of allyship on their campuses.

The Process of Intentionality

Focusing on institutional priorities and student needs creates an intentionally structured environment that spurs the intellectual and personal growth of future generations. This process—intentionality—is a concept that should reflect the needs of the campus community.

Individual institutions have differing strengths and needs in terms of the scope of diversity and inclusion on campus. Some may have a strong alliance between the LGBTQ+ community and allies; at others, students may be more prone to congregate according to their religious affiliation or find connections in societies and clubs that represent different cultures and communities on campus. Some institutions may be fortunate enough to have offerings in all of these areas.

Intentionality is taking stock of which of these resources are available at your institution and leveraging them to help students become culturally competent and willing advocates for change. One example is the creation of the Diplomats for Diversity program at the University of North Georgia (UNG). This group of student volunteers undergoes intensive training to learn how to address matters of race, class, gender, and ethnicity with their peers in a nonconfrontational manner.

This group was developed in partnership with the College of Education and the Office of Multicultural Student Affairs to engage students and give voice to issues of concern for students and faculty. On the UNG campus, as with all campuses engaging in this work, we should promote minority perspectives and diversify the voices and faces of those who lead student, faculty, and administrative presences on campus.

Transformative Learning

Use of the transformative learning theory is key to providing an intentionally constructed experience in which students and faculty can become comfortable in their discomfort.

Transformative learning hinges on reflection on the experience and its meaning to the individual for the learning to be significant. The three types of change associated with transformative learning are psychological, convictional, and behavioral—all relevant to campus cultures today.

Students and faculty must be encouraged and provided with meaningful experiences to push their understandings, allow for interaction and connection with a diverse array of people and cultures, and have repeated interactions that lead to meaningful reflection. Only through the experience and consequential reflection on the experience will change be possible on the individual level, which can then transform communities and systems. Meaningful change has rarely been fostered through force or persuasion; rather, change comes from individuals seeking and embracing justice and understanding.

To this extent, when students return to our campuses, they will bring with them a desire for social and racial justice, heightened support for movements such as Black Lives Matter, and a keen interest in participating in events that challenge the norms and previous cultures of many campuses. These new convictions—or, in some cases, strengthened convictions and behaviors—will be born of a psychological transformation happening in these months of solitude and isolation.

Safe Space vs. Brave Space

Self-reflection is a cornerstone for transformative learning at an individual level, which opens the door to vulnerability. Most of us have probably heard of or have some familiarity with the term “safe space” as an optimal method for engaging in difficult conversations. A safe space is intended to be free of bias, conflict, and criticism or potentially threatening actions, ideas, or conversations.

Unfortunately, by providing an opportunity, or a “pass,” for participants not to engage in healthy conflict—or not stretch, question, and place themselves in uncomfortable positions—“safe spaces” can reinforce the dominant group’s privilege. Marginalized groups are often expected to appease or water down their comments to maintain a feeling of safety.

“Brave space,” on the other hand, is a [revolutionary reinvention](#) of ground rules for engaging in social justice dialogue. This framework empowers faculty and administrators in leading safe, authentic, and effective dialogues or courageous conversations.

International Studies Abroad took a systemic approach to empowering on-site service-learning coordinators with tools to engage in conversations around diversity and inclusion in the current context of COVID-19 and protests against racial injustice. Over the course of several weeks in June, coordinators from across the globe participated in self-reflective exercises, discussed how implicit bias and microaggressions “present” in the classroom and intragroup dynamics, and worked through several case studies.

Ground rules for brave spaces provide the expectation that participants engage in controversy with civility, own their intentions and impact, challenge by choice, respect others, and do not attack. These rules are critical to fostering psychological safety so that students and faculty may participate equally in challenging dialogue and lay a foundation for allyship.

Examining Biases to Better Serve Our Students

International educators are no strangers to hosting, interacting with, and serving students from a variety of cultures and countries. Now would be an excellent time to offer cultural and skill-building workshops for your campus community in an effort to help faculty and students become more familiar with effective intercultural communications. We can use our field as a catalyst for supporting antiracist curriculum and program design and disrupting the narrative of xenophobia that has gripped many areas of the United States during recent years.

For this approach to be fully transformative, however, the momentum has to start from within each of us—especially those of us who benefit from privilege of any kind. We must set the example for our colleagues and students by examining our own privilege and biases, honestly identifying them, and using them as leverage to assist the work that yields dialogue and inclusivity. Education and experiences are powerful combatants to ignorance.

The focus of campus experiences should not resemble indoctrination; rather, these experiences should create opportunities for authentic interaction, learning, reflection, and organic conversation. This can be achieved through providing curricular integration and extracurricular programming that directly addresses pertinent concepts, provides a deeper understanding of culture or construct, or provides voice to communities that have been traditionally marginalized in academia.

For example, [the Global Communities Living-Learning Program](#) at the University of Maryland empowers students to explore diversity in international contexts over the course of 2 years. The residential setting, paired with coursework and co-curricular programming, fosters a learning community where diversity is valued and differences can be shared and openly discussed.

A Culture of Allyship

One desired outcome of these interactions is a culture of allyship on campus. Allyship is a lifelong commitment to self-reflection and an acknowledgment that dominant and agent groups have benefited from systemic racism, sexism, ableism, and heteronormative societies. Allyship means standing up and speaking out against social injustice, even when it is difficult, uncomfortable, or inconvenient. It's a promise of learning, listening, unlearning, and challenging yourself, as well as making room for, lifting up, and being open to growing from criticism from target communities.

Allies are not magically transformed after a single 30-minute presentation. Allies are created as the campus community galvanizes and determines that it will prioritize giving voice to those whose voices have not

been heard; transforming the curriculum by decolonializing it; and openly discussing, addressing, and reframing the perceptions of what it means to be a global steward living in a global world.

A culture of allyship is an aspirational institutional goal that must be addressed through intentional and transformative experiences both in and out of the classroom in order to equip graduates to lead our rapidly changing societies. •

NAFSA Resources

[Social Justice and International Education: Research, Practice, and Perspectives](#)

Additional Resources

“From Safe Spaces to Brave Spaces: A New Way to Frame Dialogue Around Diversity and Social Justice” chapter in [The Art of Effective Facilitation: Reflections from Social Justice Educators](#)

[White Fragility: Why It's So Hard For White People To Talk About Racism](#)

[Pedagogy of the Oppressed](#)

[How to Be an Antiracist](#)

[The Diversity Paradox: Immigration and the Color Line in Twenty-First Century America](#)

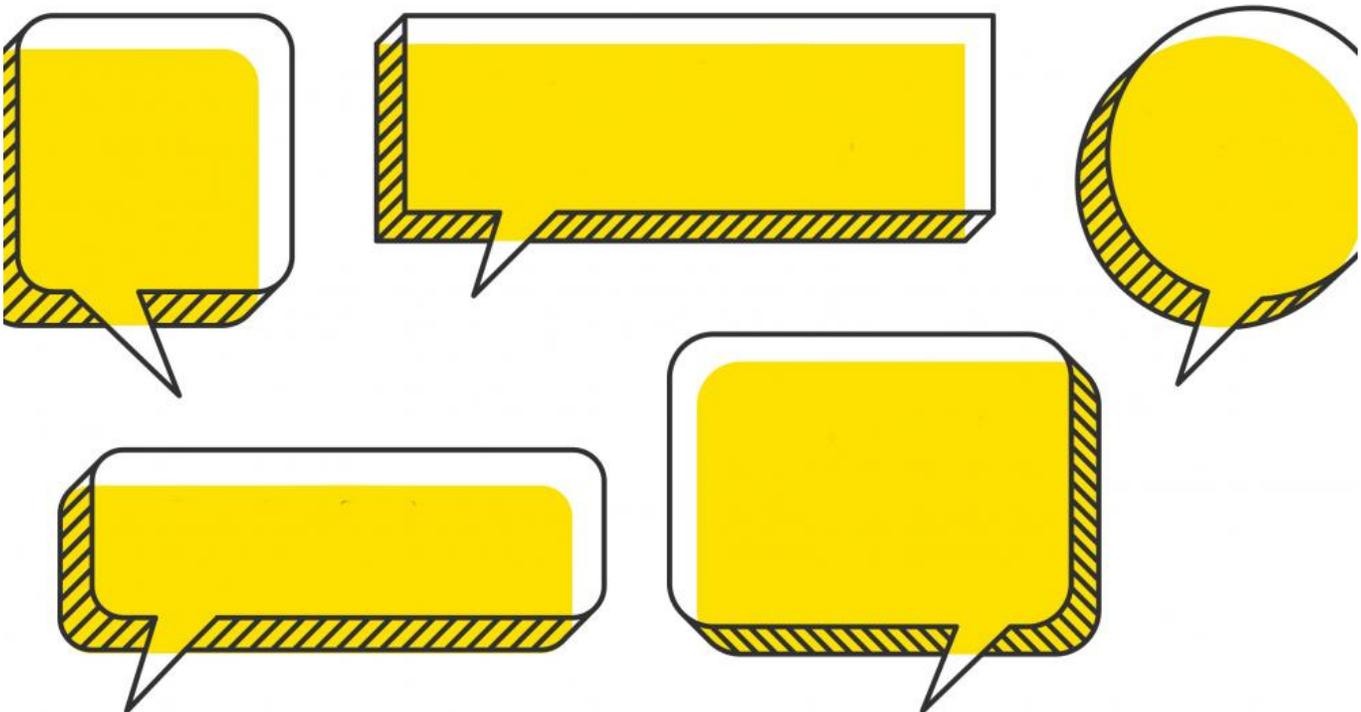
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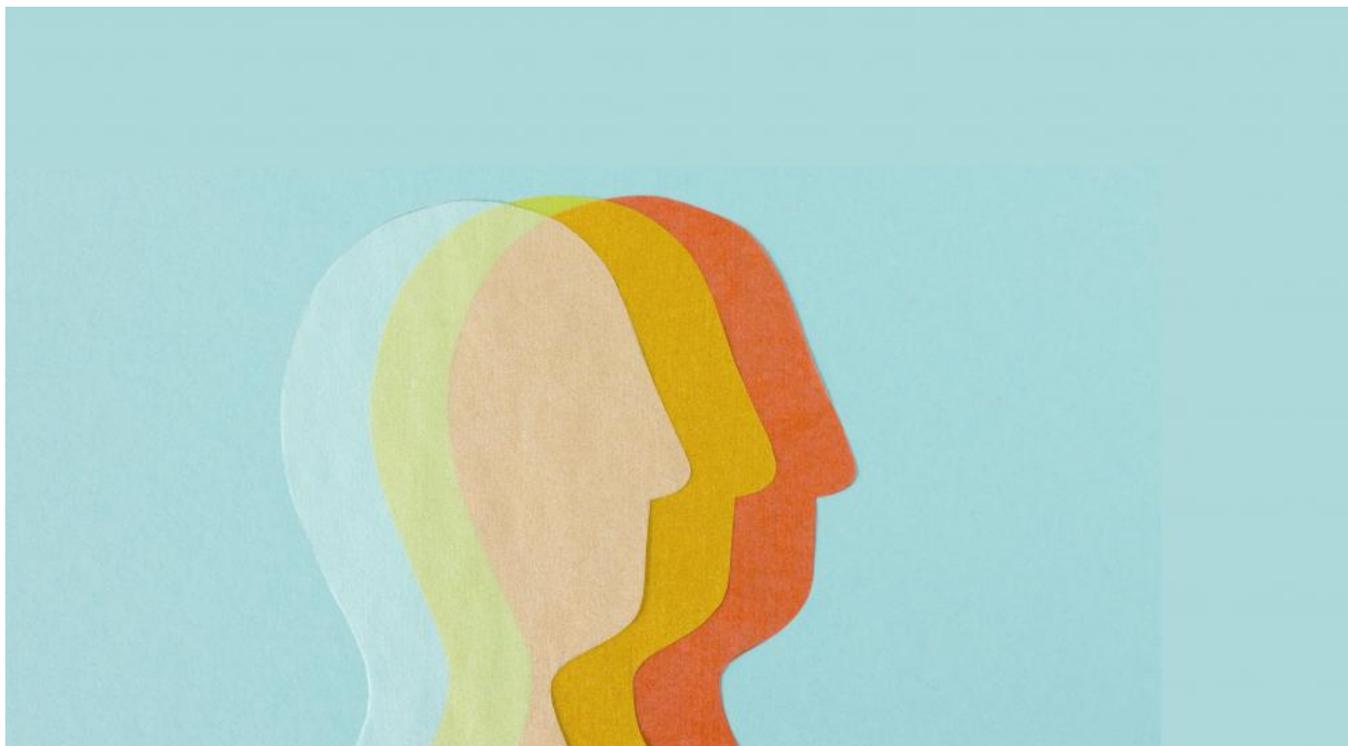


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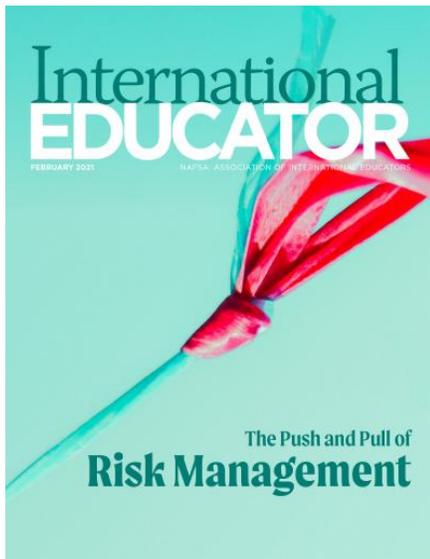


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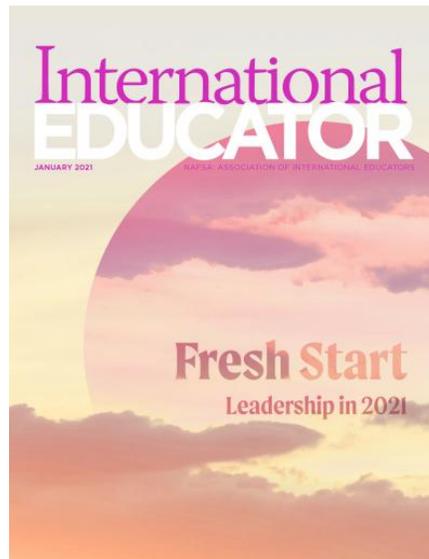
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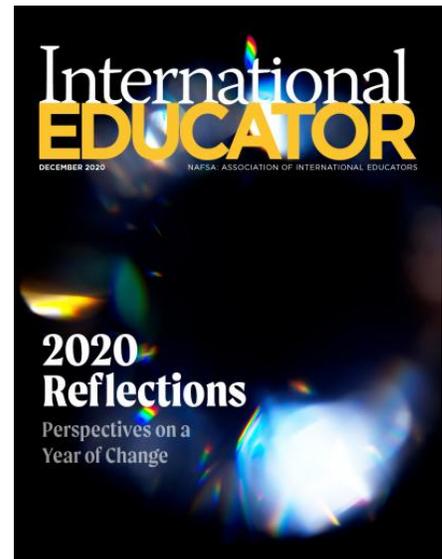
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