COMING OUT STRONGER FROM THE PANDEMIC:

(RE)BUILDING YOUR TEAM

TERRADOTTA

CONTENTS

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Introduction

T GOES WITHOUT SAYING that the last few years have upended international education. Throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, internationalization leaders learned new lessons, tried, failed, hung on, experimented, prevailed, and kept learning. Some of us lost teammates to the pandemic. Colleagues left the profession. What now? For most international offices, there is no returning to the status quo ante.

If you listen in to the conversations of international education leaders today, as I've had the opportunity to do in recent months, you may hear a swelling chorus of those committed to rebuilding, restructuring, and repositioning the international office to be stronger than before. Here, I identify strategies pursued by internationalization leaders in efforts to rebuild the international office as the upheaval of the pandemic subsides in ways that strengthen international education and position our teams to meet the future head-on.

INSTITUTIONAL COMMITMENT & CONTEXT

BEFORE DETERMINING how best to (re)build a team, it is imperative that internationalization leaders take time to read their institutional context. Institutional priorities largely influence the size and shape of the new international office "architecture" and are typically expressed through the 1) mission statement, strategic plan, or other articulated goals, and 2) budget.

According to the American Council on Education's Mapping Internationalization on U.S. Campuses: 2022 Edition,* of responding institutions:*

43%
refer specifically to internationalization in their mission statements

36%
include internationalization in the top five priorities of their strategic plans

Here at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, the 2020 strategic plan, *Carolina Next: Innovations for Public Good*, articulates the **"Global Guarantee,"** a university-wide commitment to making a global education available to every student. Through the pandemic, we held true to this commitment with a focus on internationalizing the curriculum while safely and responsibly reopening selected study abroad programs. As a result of these efforts, UNC-Chapel Hill received APLU's 2021 platinum award for Global Learning, Research, and Engagement.

*(Soler, p. 17) Statements of institutional commitment lend direction for rebuilding.

Similarly, at Louisiana State University (LSU), senior internationalization officer and executive director, Samba Dieng embarked on an ambitious reorganization in 2021. With four open director-level positions to fill, Dieng aligned each one according to three campus-wide priorities: a campus culture of study abroad, international student integration and services (two positions), and meaningful and strategic partnerships.
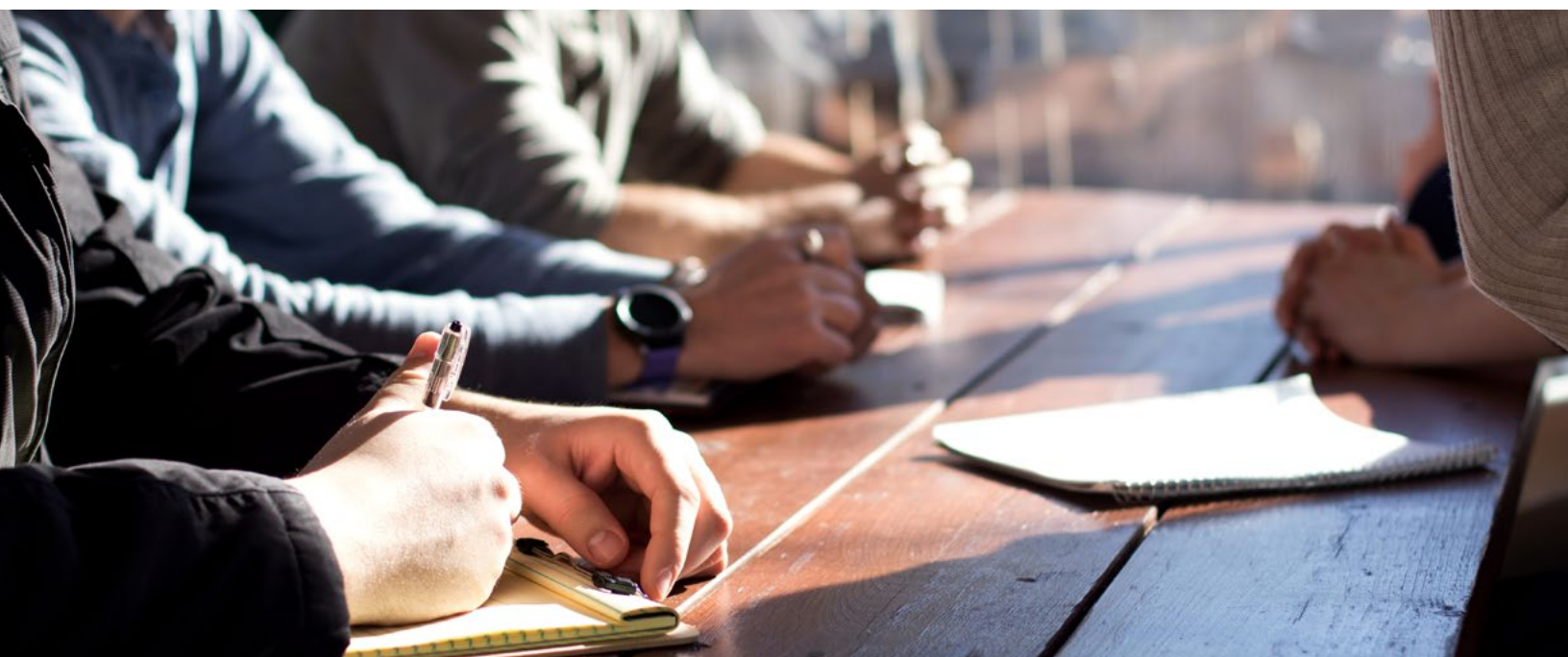
FUNDING FOR INTERNATIONALIZATION OVER THREE YEARS

42% stayed the same

16% increased

18% decreased

At the same time, the budget situation for international offices emerging from the pandemic is a mixed picture, requiring leaders to adopt varying responses. According to ACE's 2022 Mapping Internationalization, funding for internationalization stayed roughly the same over three years for 42% of institutions, while 16% reported a funding increase and 18% reported a decrease. (Soler, p. 14) Some institutions have expanded their international offices, with newfound appreciation for global risk management and student support. Others continue to face belt-tightening, with pressure to generate revenue lost to the cancellation of study abroad or changing international student enrollment patterns. **Leaders are responding in several ways: filling gaps made evident by the pandemic, realigning staff and programs to strategy, finding new efficiencies, and forging partnerships.**

ORGANIZATIONAL
STRUCTURE

IF MISSIONS AND BUDGETS ARE STATEMENTS OF INSTITUTIONAL COMMITMENT, ORGANIZATIONAL CHARTS TELL A STORY: What goes on here? Who does the work? How do people and programs relate to one another? The organizational chart can be a vehicle for internationalization leaders to craft their narrative and make it visible to others. At UNC-Chapel Hill, I used a large white board outside my office to sketch out a new structure, which invited constructive feedback and created transparency about staffing changes. Nick Gozik, dean of global education at Elon University, similarly notes that a re-organization in 2021 added a clearer logic to the office structure.

Centralization vs. Decentralization

Within any re-envisioning process, leaders will need to consider the pros and cons of centralization and decentralization. Centralized operations can be more streamlined, and staff have the potential to learn about one another's areas of responsibility. A disadvantage is the distance centralization creates from academic departments, where content experts reside. Decentralization gives more control to departments but can produce silos, redundancy, and fragmentation. (Czub et al.)

Consolidation

For some international offices, structural decisions may be made at a higher level. Prior to the pandemic, Miguel Ayllón, executive director of international partnerships and study abroad at the University of Missouri ("Mizzou"), notes there were seven separate study abroad offices across 13 academic units. Driven by budget pressures and a need to reduce redundancy, in 2021 Mizzou's provost initiated a process of centralizing study abroad operations within four of the seven offices. All but one used the same software, Terra Dotta's Studio Abroad, which helped in consolidating program management.

Operating Lean

At one end of the spectrum, many offices today have a leaner organizational structure. It's tempting to say they are "doing more with less," but in fact they have redistributed roles to balance workload, reduced programming, created campus partnerships to share responsibilities, or increased the use of technology—while achieving the same or greater impact.

Shared Positions

Several international offices have created shared positions with other campus units to achieve common goals while reducing the financial burden to any one office. Partnering units include financial aid, teaching and learning, admissions, diversity and inclusion, institutional research, and risk management. Esther Gottlieb, senior advisor for international affairs at The Ohio State University, reports that a shared position with the office of diversity and inclusion has led to greater participation of diverse and first-generation students in education abroad and professional development for international affairs staff.

…international educators observe students' growing preference for online advising and document submission. To manage the increase of online services, the need for reliable case management software has never been greater.
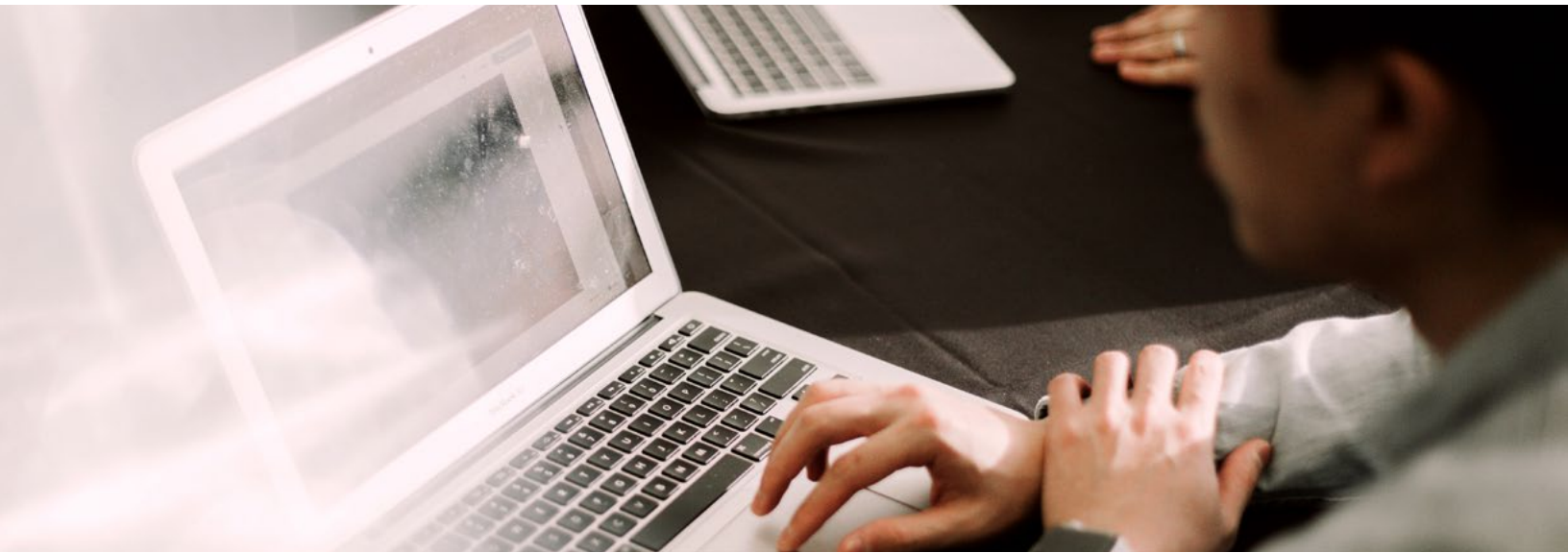
Technology

Technology is helping international offices achieve efficiency. Just as instruction shifted online during the pandemic, so did international services and programs—information sessions, advising hours, and orientation. Even at mostly residential campuses, international educators observe students' growing preference for online advising and document submission. To manage the increase of online services, the need for reliable case management software has never been greater.

Scope

At the other end of the spectrum, some international offices have grown during the pandemic. At Colorado State University (CSU), the Office of International Programs grew by 50%, says Chad Hoseth, assistant vice provost for international affairs, and now has a wider scope of responsibility for international students and scholars. While staffing levels have remained constant at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU), Jill Blondin, Associate Vice Provost for Global Initiatives, says, **"the pandemic provided [her office] the opportunity to demonstrate how critical the international office and internationalization is to the success of the institution."**

NEW AND EMERGING
ROLES

SCANNING THE NAFSA Career Center or Gateway International Group job boards, there is a noticeable shift in staffing priorities. New roles are dedicated to risk management, as well as internationalization at home efforts, with an understanding that travel is not always guaranteed or advisable. Facing budgetary pressures, many offices have likewise created new positions focused on communicating the impact of international programs. As roles become more defined and specialized, new professional associations have formed to support them, such as the University Risk Management and Insurance Association (URMIA).

Specialization vs. Diverse Backgrounds

The evolution of international education roles represents greater specialization in certain areas, and such knowledge can be critical to managing the complexities of immigration compliance or global risk. However, specialization is important "only in some areas," says David Fleshler of Case Western Reserve University, who was a lawyer and Congressional aide before transitioning to higher education. International education leaders take many paths, he says, and "bringing a diverse background can be remarkably helpful."

RENEWING
THE INTERNATIONAL
EDUCATION PROFESSION
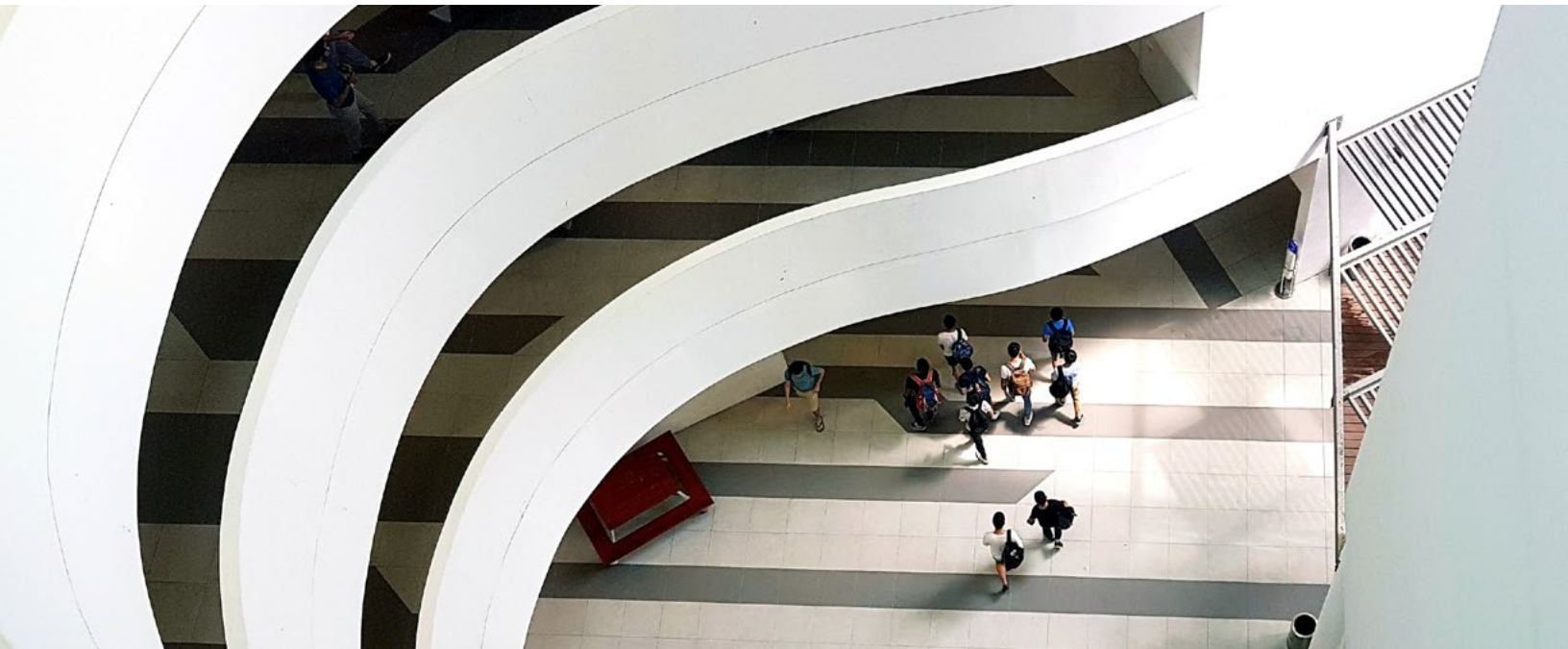
MANY EXPERIENCED A REDUCTION IN WORKFORCE DURING THE PANDEMIC, whether due to budget reductions, health-related challenges, or the "great resignation." The hard and simple fact is that fewer people are now choosing to work in international education. "You have to do more to attract them," says LSU's Dieng, "and we have to do more training."

Leaders recruiting for new or vacant positions struggle to attract strong applicant pools. **It can be challenging to find candidates for high-skilled jobs that pay relatively low wages and lack advancement opportunities.** (Stamp) Meanwhile, the cost of living in U.S. college towns increased during the pandemic, as highly paid workers in urban centers like San Francisco relocated to find better quality of life, pricing out university employees. Compounding these challenges, human resources and other supporting units have experienced attrition, complicating search processes.

Improve Recruiting and Retention

Attracting new talent requires leaders to be flexible and recognize skills acquired outside of higher education. Mark Toner suggests three avenues for improving recruiting and retention:

➤ Change hiring criteria to encourage applicants who don't have the exact qualifications or prior experience

➤ Create staffing structures with more opportunities for advancement

➤ Provide more training and mentoring

The opportunity to hire can be an opportunity to increase diversity, says Elon's Gozik. "By looking at skills and other types of relevant experience, we have been able to consider a wider array of applicants—something that can be incredibly valuable from an inclusive excellence perspective."

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DEVELOPING AND RETAINING
EXPERTISE

AS NEW PROFESSIONALS ENTER THE FIELD, INTERNATIONALIZATION LEADERS HAVE A TREMENDOUS OPPORTUNITY—and responsibility—to develop the next generation of talent. But it's a considerable investment to train new team members and get them up to speed. Professional development has become a high priority at Mizzou, says Ayllón. "Our leadership is very supportive of staff professional development opportunities such as participation in international site visits and conferences."

Flexible Work Options

As internationalization leaders build new teams, it's vital to recognize that we live in a different operating environment and that team members have different expectations. For one, they are more likely to request remote and flexible work options. Today most international student and scholar staff prefer to work remotely, although two-thirds of offices are now working on campus full time or three to four days per week. (Gallagher) Many offices have introduced remote work options that would not have been considered before the pandemic. At mostly residential campuses, including UNC-Chapel Hill, student-facing advising positions have the option of working remotely at least some of the time. That flexibility increases for less student-facing roles, such as finance and operations.

Responding to Staff Concerns

Internationalization leaders are taking new measures to improve retention and satisfaction, directly addressing the reasons many workers quit during the "great resignation." According to a 2021 Pew Research survey, those factors included low pay (63%), a lack of opportunity for advancement (63%), feeling disrespected at work (57%), child-care issues (48%), a lack of flexibility (45%), and not having good benefits (43%). (Parker and Horowitz) In response, leaders have worked to reclassify positions, promote existing staff, adjust salaries to market rates, and create more "rungs on the ladder" for staff to advance.

REASONS MANY WORKERS QUIT DURING THE "GREAT RESIGNATION"

LOW PAY	**63%**
LACK OF OPPORTUNITY FOR ADVANCEMENT	**63%**
FEELING DISRESPECTED AT WORK	**57%**
CHILD-CARE ISSUES	**48%**
A LACK OF FLEXIBILITY	**45%**
NOT HAVING GOOD BENEFITS	**43%**
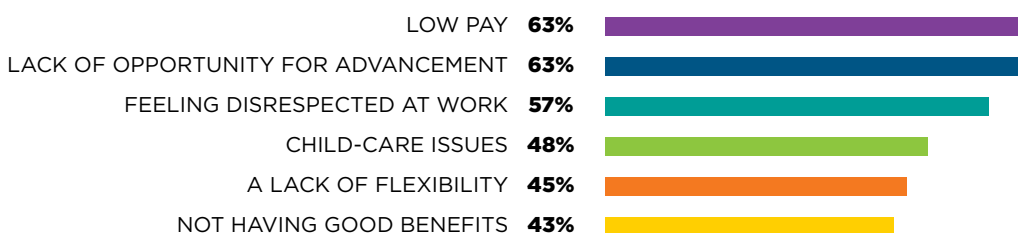
ORGANIZATIONAL
CULTURE

AS INTERNATIONALIZATION LEADERS, we focus a lot of effort on navigating international cultural differences. It can be easy to underestimate the influence of organizational culture on our ability to attract, build, and retain high-performing teams. While leaders can set tone and expectations, changing workplace dynamics are shaping organizational culture in new ways that require us to adapt and innovate.

The Importance of Connection

A prime example is the shift to remote or hybrid work. Many leaders believe remote work erodes team cohesion, and that only by gathering again around the water cooler can we rebuild strong connections—with connections being critical, as more connected workers perform at higher levels. (Harvard Business Review) But what if we were to reimagine a new, fully hybrid organizational culture, in which connections can be formed and strengthened both in-person and online? Technology would become more ubiquitous in offices and conference rooms, requiring some investment and changes to operations. Leaders would need to be mindful about avoiding "proximity bias," the tendency "to treat workers who are physically closer to them more favorably." (Tsipursky) But the benefit to employee performance could be significant. According to a 2022 article in Harvard Business Review, among employees with a high degree of flexibility, "in which they had some freedom over location, schedule, work volume, team and projects," 53% reported a high degree of connectedness, compared with 18% who experienced low flexibility.

EMPLOYEES REPORTING A HIGH DEGREE OF CONNECTEDNESS:

53%

experienced some freedom over location, schedule, work volume, team, and projects

18%

low flexibility

Team Cohesion

Creating team cohesion is a particular challenge for international offices that have experienced high turnover. The addition of new colleagues can bring energy and optimism. Yet, it can take time to build trust, discover new team members' strengths, and begin performing as a team. When Mizzou's Ayllón set out to develop a new strategic plan, he realized the mix of new and continuing staff hadn't yet gelled. So, he first scheduled a series of in-person strategic retreats focused on relationship building—to establish a shared foundation—before undertaking planning.

...it is important to "remember what makes the profession fulfilling."

Values

At the heart of any organization's culture are its values. Rebuilding the international office opens opportunities to align staffing and programming more closely with those values. For example, several leaders have focused rebuilding efforts on achieving greater diversity, equity, and inclusion, and on overcoming barriers that prevent all students from gaining access to international education. LSU's Dieng observes that international educators are "not just in it for the paycheck"—they are driven by values, and they want to be valued. Gallagher adds that it is important to "remember what makes the profession fulfilling." (Gallagher)

LOOKING TO THE
FUTURE

ALTHOUGH TURNOVER HAS BEEN CHALLENGING, it has also brought renewal and increased diversity to many offices. Looking to the future, internationalization leaders remain largely optimistic. Among respondents to ACE's 2021 Mapping Internationalization survey, **66% expect internationalization to increase** at their institutions over the next five years. The priorities, they predict, will be on increasing inbound and outbound student mobility and strengthening internationalization at home. Senior international officers who participated in a follow-up survey noted that "strategies for internationalization should be more flexible to respond to future risks." (Soler) And so we move forward, adapting, experimenting, and always learning.

INCOMING **OUTGOING** **TRAVEL RISK** **ENGAGEMENT**

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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