With escalating hostilities around the world, universities face the daunting task of making international and domestic students feel safe and welcome.

It may be more challenging than ever to reassure international students that they are safe and welcome on university campuses. During the fall semester, tension escalated at many colleges as the Syrian refugee crisis dominated the news, terrorists attacked venues around Paris and a couple masterminded a shooting massacre in San Bernardino, Calif.

As the world struggles to understand and respond, here’s a look at how one university seeks to reassure and embrace its international students. Portland State University (PSU) is a public school in downtown Portland, Ore., serving more than 28,000 students. Eight percent of its students are international, with nearly 700 from Middle Eastern countries.

ADDRESSING STUDENT CONCERNS

Halfway through the first semester, the Intensive English Language Program (IELP) at PSU holds a “wellness check” for the 450-plus international students it helps with English language skills. The casual event is divided into four language groups—Arabic, Chinese, English and Japanese—so students can share their experiences and support one another in their native tongue. Last fall, PSU used the mid-term wellness check to address international strife and gauge student reactions.
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PSU offers undergraduate and master’s degrees through its Conflict Resolution Program. Two graduate students in the program—one from Syria and another from Egypt—are forming a support community for students in countries with conflict. They began the project prior to the Paris bombings, but have since decided to expand their reach. They would like to add discussions on how PSU can make international students feel safe and an important part of the campus community.

The IELP reached out to Jahed Sukhun, the vice president of the Muslim Educational Trust in Portland and a former Portland State colleague, to facilitate the Arabic language group. Founded in 1993, the Muslim Educational Trust strives to educate the Muslim and non-Muslim community about Islam. Sukhun met with the Arabic-speaking group and led role-playing exercises to help them react if they are ever in a situation where they feel uncomfortable or harassed.

The ultimate goal of this event and other efforts at PSU is to not just alleviate students’ immediate concerns, but to fulfill a broader purpose. “Our mission is not just about teaching people English,” says Julie Haun, director of the IELP. “It’s about giving our international students the chance to experience being part of a university campus. And we also want our domestic students to have positive interactions with international students.”

TAKING A MULTIDEPARTMENT APPROACH

Before the semester break in December, Christina Luther, director of the OISSS, emailed international students to acknowledge global tension and its effect on students, but remind them they are welcome at PSU. She assured the students that the university will continue finding ways to build community and create dialogue among international and domestic students. In addition, she provided a list of resources should the students ever encounter any problems.

But outreach to international students at PSU is not the sole domain of the OISSS. Luther and her team partner with other groups on campus to promote inclusion and celebrate diversity, including the Intensive English Language Program. Other entities currently working hand-in-hand with OISSS are the Middle East Studies Center, the Global Diversity & Inclusion Office and the Conflict Resolution Program.

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OFFERING ADVICE

Townley admits that soothing international students and creating harmony among the entire student population is tricky. "It’s difficult," she says. "And we certainly don’t have all the answers." But she and her peers share some tips to help universities keep peace on campus in an increasingly hostile global environment—or at least foster dialogue.

- **Look for community partners.** PSU has a strong relationship with the Muslim Educational Trust. Among the issues the organization helps the school with is potential tension among international groups, such as Sunni and Shia students. "I would never pretend to have expertise in that area," says Haun. "Those tensions can exist between students and play out in the classroom." So PSU reaches out to the Muslim Educational Trust for guidance.
- **Cover tricky topics in class.** The IELP has a mandatory class for first-term international students called American Culture and Academic Life. "It’s designed to help them adjust culturally, learn how a university system works and understand how to connect to and be a part of campus life," says Haun. Such classes also offer an opportunity to discuss global discord and its effect on students.
- **Involve campus administration.** "It’s our job to keep the administration informed about how world events are impacting our international student population," says Townley. "We must work with the administration to set up ongoing workshops and community dialogue. We can’t expect one blanket email to ease the fear and tension that may be present among our staff and students. It’s a continual process."
- **Reach out to campus departments.** Last year, the OISSS and IELP held 11 workshops on nurturing and supporting international students for groups across campus ranging from the frontline staff at the recreation center to professors in the business school. "This ongoing work is about helping academic departments and other units do the best they can," says Haun. "It lays the foundational groundwork so when awful things happen in the world you’ve already started having important conversations."
- **Work one-on-one with students.** "I try to find out how students are feeling one student at a time," says Townley, who initiates conversations with international students during advising sessions. "It’s so much more effective face-to-face. People are looking for someone to be friendly, be curious, ask questions and listen to what they think."
- **Don’t forget to have fun!** Invite both international and domestic students to social events, such as pizza parties, game-watching events or multicultural celebrations. "The more we can connect students of different faiths and backgrounds, the more openness and understanding will develop," says Townley.

Like other universities, PSU strives to be hospitable to all its students and hopes that implementing a variety of tactics and events will foster a friendly campus environment. "We have such a rich history of being welcoming," says Townley. "That’s why we have so many students coming here from the Middle East. We want to continue to have that reputation."