



A LOOK AT HOW ONE ACADEMIC INSTITUTION HELPS FACULTY AND STAFF BECOME BETTER ATTUNED TO THE DIFFERENCES—AND NEEDS—OF ITS INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS.

INCREASING

# CROSS-CULTURAL COMPETENCY

In the fall of 2014, more than 950 international students from 73 countries were enrolled at the University of Idaho. At first glance it may seem surprising to find such an eclectic population in the small town of Moscow, Idaho, nestled in the rolling Palouse hills. But it's part of a calculated strategy at the university aiming toward "comprehensive internationalization"—exposing faculty, staff and students to a culturally diverse environment.

The number of international students at colleges and universities in the United States rose 8 percent to a record high of 886,052 in the 2013-2014 academic year, according to the 2014 Open Doors Report on International Educational Exchange

released by the Institute of International Education. The potential benefits are huge: Expanding the international population allows students, faculty and staff to live and work in a multicultural community, which may ultimately lead to collaboration on projects that tackle today's tough global issues.

***"Most universities recognize the importance of adding intercultural competency to the toolbox of skills integral to preparing students to succeed in today's globally networked environment," says Susan Bender, Ph.D., Executive Director of International Engagement and Programs at the University of Idaho. "But it is equally necessary to provide opportunities for faculty and staff to develop their intercultural skills."***

But diversity brings challenges, too, particularly to faculty and staff members trying to assimilate foreign students in the classroom. There may be language barriers and discomfort with American pedagogy, such as animated classroom discussions and group projects.

The University of Idaho employs several strategies to increase the cross-cultural competency of its faculty and staff.



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# 5 INITIATIVES AIMED AT CROSS-CULTURAL LEARNING

"Comprehensive internationalization means making global education a central theme in everything we do—in the classroom and beyond," says Bender. "A multifaceted approach, including both large initiatives and everyday activities, contributes to enriching an institutional environment," says Bender. Here are five venues that provide those opportunities at the University of Idaho:



1

**CROSS-CULTURAL CONFERENCE:** Last spring, the university hosted the Cultural Literacy and Competence Symposium. The one-day event featured keynote addresses, panel discussions and break-out sessions designed to help faculty and staff increase their intercultural skills. As University of Idaho President Chuck Staben said in his introductory remarks, "We as a university must be inclusive in order to be excellent."

2

**GLOBAL CERTIFICATE PROGRAM:** The university is currently developing an International Certificate Program. Bender says it will incorporate one-day training on core concepts and theories in intercultural communication and provide several options for related activities and programs.

3

**CULTURE-SPECIFIC SESSIONS:** A division of the International Programs Office hosts cultural sessions on Brazil, China and Saudi Arabia—the top three countries represented by international students on campus. "Workshops focused on culture-specific learning offer an overview of the culture using parables, which provide insight into cultural values and perspectives," says Bender. "We also invite international students and scholars from those countries to share their perspectives with the audience." For instance, attendees might discuss the overall impact of China's one-child policy and its trickle-down ramifications on higher education.

4

**PARTNER EVENTS WITH NATIONAL CLUBS:** The International Program Office helps the university's 10 nationality clubs promote events to all faculty, staff and students on campus, not just their members. These events range from a French Film Festival held each fall to Africa Night, a dynamic evening celebrating the music, food and cultures of Africa.

5

**TRAVEL AND STUDY GRANTS:** The University of Idaho, with funding from the Universities Studies Abroad Consortium, offers international development awards to faculty and staff who want to spend a month overseas studying a new language, taking regional classes or enhancing their understanding of different cultures. One of last summer's recipients was Kelli Schrand, Program Advisor for the International Studies Program. Schrand, who had never before traveled internationally, went to Spain and studied the Basque language and traditions.

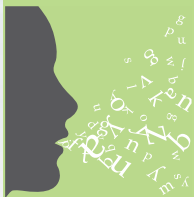


***"Part of comprehensive internationalization is making global perspectives part of everything we do—in the classroom and beyond," says Bender. "It's doing all the little things that add up to a multicultural, rich environment."***

# SIMPLE STEPS TO PREVENT MISCOMMUNICATION

Susan Bender, Ph.D., recommends that faculty and staff who want to better understand their international students should begin by looking inward. "Intercultural understanding starts with paying attention to yourself and understanding your own biases and cultural lens," says Bender, who is Executive Director of International Engagement and Programs at the University of Idaho. "Be aware of your own assumptions, perceptions and language."

Being careful about the language you use is especially important, she says. Try to avoid:



- Speaking too quickly
- Using acronyms
- Referring to pop culture
- Using colloquialisms

The day-to-day expressions we use may confuse international students. When a group of foreign students visiting the University of Idaho in February went to a restaurant, some were perplexed when asked, “For here or to go?” after they ordered. A simple rephrasing cleared up the confusion: “Do you plan to eat that here or will you take it with you?”

Bender concludes, "What you're saying may not always be understood. When you see that confused look on someone's face, rather than get frustrated and repeat yourself or raise your voice, back up and think about how you can say it differently."

# REAPING THE REWARDS OF CULTURAL DIVERSITY

When faculty and staff are attuned to the needs and nuances of all students, including those from overseas, the results can be amazing. “It creates an environment where people are very excited to have students from around the world and those students are invited to share their perceptions,” says Bender. This, in turn, facilitates collaborative relationships that can have profound outcomes.



As an example, Bender cites the recent visit of a Fulbright Scholar from India to the University of Idaho. He worked alongside a professor in Environmental Literature and Ecocriticism, who set up meetings with scholars in the same field from several local universities. Forging these connections provided a great synergy around the topic of global environmental issues and the expression of those issues through literature.

But before you can get to those lofty discussions, you must start with basic cross-cultural awareness. The University of Idaho strives to educate its faculty and staff through seminars, certificate programs, travel opportunities and more. "There's always more you can do," says Bender. **"There's no end to what you can do."**



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