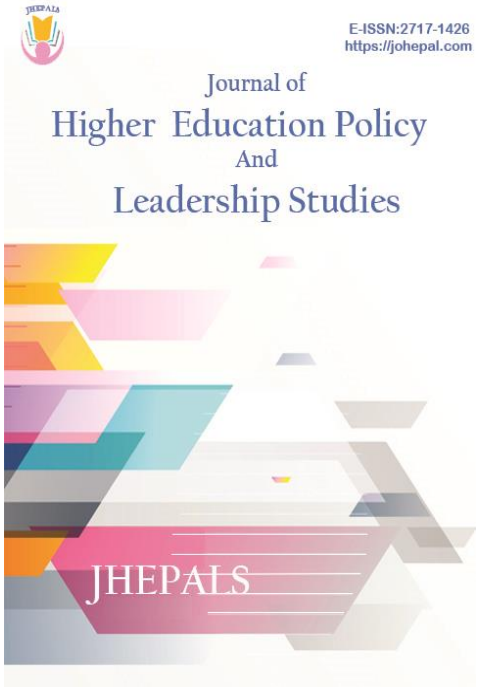
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The Role of International Education in a Polarized World: Interview with Ms. Melissa A. Torres

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Melissa A. Torres *



Melissa Torres is The Forum's President and CEO and has two decades of experience in higher education and program development. She previously served as Vice President for Academic Programs at IES Abroad where she supervised 36 international study abroad centers in Asia, Europe and Latin America. Her campus-based experience includes leading a variety of international initiatives for three institutions, including Brown University, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and The Ohio State University. She worked as a change management consultant for Accenture, and most recently worked with a variety of colleges and universities to develop innovative, service-learning programs as Vice President of Institutional Relations at Global Vision International.

Melissa served as Chair of The Forum's Outcomes Assessment and Research committee for three years, was a member of NAFSA's Work, Internships, Volunteering and Research Abroad (WIVRA) subcommittee and a founding member of the Business International Studies Network (BISNet) Business Colloquium. She holds a BA in International Studies from Stonehill College and a Master's degree in Global Education from The Ohio State University. She speaks Spanish fluently and has studied French and Portuguese.

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Interview

JHEPALS has the honor and privilege to publish an exclusive interview with Ms. Melissa A. Torres (President & CEO at The Forum on Education Abroad - USA); a renowned higher education leader with extensive leadership experience; and passionate about advancing excellence and innovation in international higher education. Interviews with globally recognized scholars within the realm of HE policy and leadership give us a novel and new chance to learn from wealth of knowledge and expertise which, in most cases, are from years of enormous and continuous research.

We are sure that Ms. Melissa A. Torres's insightful, illuminating and critical responses enriched with her academic/ leadership experience in higher education and global cooperation will be of interest to a broad audience of international researchers, students, policymakers, and leaders in Higher Education.

Question #1

We'd like to learn about your teaching, research, and specifically leadership experiences within the realm of Higher Education. And how such experiences help you bring new and novel ideas to the Forum on Education Abroad as the President and CEO?

Answer:

As the granddaughter and great-granddaughter of immigrants, I have always had an interest in people and cultures from around the world. That curiosity led me to pursue various roles that enabled me to interact, learn from, and teach a variety of subjects. From my early days of working on USAID-funded professional development programs that helped healthcare professionals around the world develop their management and financial skills to leading change management projects in the financial services industry for Accenture, I have always sought opportunities to hone intercultural communication skills that enable me to understand complex global problems from a variety of perspectives. I led a U.S. Department of Education Title III career ladder program for immigrant educators from across Latin America, which enhanced my understanding of the role that socioeconomic factors play in shaping a person's world view. In 1997, I began working in higher education, developing and implementing international education programs for MBA and Executive Education programs at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill's Kenan-Flagler Business School. I later led the Center for International Business Education and Research (CIBER) at The Ohio State University and then became Vice President for Academics at one of the largest education abroad provider organizations in the U.S.

This variety of professional experiences helps me understand the vast array of institutions and organizations that make up the 820+ member organizations of The Forum on Education Abroad. I know the role that relationships and trust play in the creation of successful partnerships and I'm very attuned to the changing needs of our field. Since I became President and CEO of The Forum in 2019, our field has faced numerous existential crises, including those wrought by the COVID-19 pandemic, which required our association to offer

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immediate guidance on everything from how to immediately repatriate tens of thousands of students, to advice for delivering online programs that allowed students to continue their academic progress when their programs where interrupted in the middle of the semester. At the same time, I recognized the importance of making time and space for our community to share information and support one another.

In the five years since, I have needed to draw on my professional experiences and personal network to advocate for novel approaches to emerging threats and opportunities that impact students' access to education abroad and the vitally important role these programs play in developing globally competitive employees and informed members of the global community. The rapidly growing influence of AI and other emerging technologies, the changing nature of work and the needs of employers, demographic and geopolitical trends, are just a few of the topics that will require innovative approaches and new forms of leadership in the days ahead.

Question #2

Could you tell us about the Forum on Education Abroad and how it initially began its work?

Answer:

The Forum is a 501(c)(3) non-profit, membership association recognized by the U.S. Department of Justice and the U.S. Federal Trade Commission as the Standards Development Organization (SDO) for the field of education abroad. Our Standards of Good Practice for Ed Abroad are recognized as the definitive means by which the quality of education abroad programs may be judged. We have 820 institutional members including U.S. colleges and universities, overseas institutions, consortia, agencies, organizations, and foundations who are committed to improving education abroad.

The Forum's mission is to cultivate educators who champion high quality education abroad experiences that ignite curiosity, impact lives, and contribute to a better world. The organization was established in 2001 by a group of international educators who wanted to establish standards and guidelines that would enable institutions and organizations to establish and evaluate high quality education abroad programs.

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Question #3

What are your current projects at the Forum on Education Abroad? Could you tell us a little about them? And how do universities benefit from your services?

Answer:

The education abroad field has long acted as a catalyst to bridge cultural divides. Today's climate demands renewed conflict resolution strategies. Political and technological changes are deepening divisions, eroding trust in institutions, and making it harder to connect and agree on basic facts. When differences are seen as insurmountable, the essential work of educating students across cultures grows more challenging.

The Forum on Education Abroad's new Beyond Polarization Residency will unite international educators to share frameworks and tools for productive engagement across differences. Participants will learn from both peers and experts from various fields, exploring ways to address polarization and build global understanding. By integrating insights from other domains, the program empowers people to lead conflict transformation in their organizations and communities.

Throughout the four-day Beyond Polarization Residency, participants will learn about neurobiology and emotion, new digital forms of persuasion, diplomacy and peace-building, and much more from renowned experts outside the field of education abroad. Additionally, participants will be mentored by a team of experienced educators to understand and discover new ways of engaging with difference and division. Participants will be able to bring this practice back to their own organizational contexts.

Question #4

Could you tell us one of your international initiatives that had the most impact?

Answer:

The Forum was founded in 2001 by a group of international educators who believed that high quality study abroad experiences could transform students' lives. In order for institutions of higher education to ensure that their own programs and those of their education abroad partners were of the highest calibre, The Forum developed the *Standards of Good Practice for Education Abroad,*

Free for Forum members and non-members, the *Standards* specify minimum requirements, quality indicators, and a framework for continuous improvement for education abroad. This publication is available in English, Spanish, and French, and is applicable to undergraduate, graduate, professional, and continuing education, whether for credit or not for credit. Now in its sixth edition, the development, continual updating, dissemination and numerous forms of guidance and consultation in how to apply the *Standards* has dramatically changed the entire field of education abroad.

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The Forum is also widely recognized as an international expert in the area of health, safety, and security for students, faculty, and administrators participating in education abroad programs. Our attention to this critically important topic within study abroad has helped make safety and security a top priority for all international educators. Our annual Student Risk Report, for example, collects and compiles data about the significant incidents that happen to students on their organization's programs using a common framework so that the data can be reported publicly to education abroad stakeholders and be used to make informed decisions and build in risk mitigations where possible.

In 2025, The Forum will host its 16th Annual Institute on Health, Safety, Security and Risk Management (Health & Safety Institute), the premiere event for education abroad professionals focused on risk management issues. The Institute provides attendees with tools to strengthen institutional and organizational strategies for risk mitigation, incident prevention, emergency response, and overall well-being for education abroad participants. The goals of the Institute are to:

- Explore Emerging Trends: Engage with new and innovative approaches to health, safety, security, and risk management, both within education abroad and from other industries and fields.
- Strengthen Safety and Security: Identify strategies that further enhance the well-being and security of education abroad participants.
- Meet the Standards of Good Practice: Provide tools and resources to help organizations meet the Standards of Good Practice for Education Abroad through case studies, examples of best practices, and critical analysis of requirements.

Question #5

How do you see your works in the current political and economic crises?

Answer:

At a point in history when ideological divides, changing geopolitical landscapes, and an evolving global economy can lead to isolation and division, we deliver impactful, accessible, and intellectually and personally meaningful programs that enable educators to deliver high quality education abroad experiences for all students.

We endeavor to share with learners the value and significance of international education and experience, and the impact that it can have on them and those with whom they interact. We encourage learners to maximize international learning and engagement through meaningful and respectful communication with other people and other cultures, and to reflect on and articulate the value and meaning of their experiences for their personal and professional lives, future careers and current communities. We encourage and support educators in modeling this behavior themselves.

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We recognize the importance of establishing clear expectations and communicating them to learners based on these shared values. We know that empowered and informed learners make responsible decisions, take accountability for their actions, and understand their own responsibilities.

Question #6

Do you think universities are promoting international activities during these crises?

Answer:

I believe today's students understand the value of experiencing the world for themselves as a key factor in developing their own opinions. As IIE's Open Doors report indicates, students were eager to participate in education abroad programs as soon as travel restrictions were lifted. It is now up to universities to ensure they provide academically rigorous international opportunities to students, regardless of degree level or academic program. I know there are many competing priorities and financial pressures, yet I believe it is imperative that universities prioritize and adequately fund international programs for students, expand international research partnerships in all regions of the world, and fully integrate international students into campus life. As a high-impact practice (HIP) as defined by the American Association of Colleges & Universities, education abroad programs should be fully integrated into every academic major. A rich variety of international programs which are deliberately designed to achieve specific learning goals, including economic, environmental, and social sustainability, should be accessible to every student. As international educators, it is critical that we partner not only with academic units, but also with administrative units such as student affairs, career management, registrar, alumni, and sustainability offices across campus to engage our colleagues and maximize the investment of resources available to support the internationalization goals that are included in many, if not most, institutional strategic plans. Further, we must ensure responsibility for international activities includes the highest levels of the institution by engaging trustees and university presidents.

Question #7

How do you assess the benefits of service-learning program? How do you measure the outcome of these programs?

Answer:

Whether a stand-alone program or one component of a course or program, community engagement experiences abroad present a unique set of benefits and challenges for students and institutions/organizations. It is essential to ensure that the project(s) undertaken by visiting students are community-identified and driven. It is critical that

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institutions and organizations developing community engagement opportunities empower the diverse voices and perspectives in a community, rely on local expertise, and involve community members from a range of perspectives continuously. Throughout the process, institutions and organizations should prioritize the value of listening, learning, and working together with the host community, and avoid a results oriented approach focused solely on specific timelines or deliverables.

The most effective community engagement experiences abroad offer reciprocal benefits to communities and students. In some cases, these benefits may be tangible, particularly for service learning and volunteer experience abroad, but in others, members of the host community and students may value the intangible benefits that often inform the education abroad experience, such as exposure to new cultures and perspectives, engaging in a shared learning experience to build mutual understanding and to grapple with complex global issues, as well as an opportunity for all participants to experience personal growth.

Community engagement programs by nature expose both students and host community members to differences in cultural and social norms. In some cases, this may also involve differences in access to resources and opportunities, as well as economic disparities. Intentionally structured community engagement experiences abroad can moderate preconceived notions and stereotypes about a country or community, and guide students to develop their listening and observational skills, along with a capacity for cultural humility.

Community engagement programs located in developing, immigrant, or marginalized communities require thoughtful collaboration and communication between the home institution, coordinating organization, and the host community, with particular sensitivity to the dynamics of students from cultures of privilege working in communities with fewer material resources.

Question #8

Do your works at the Forum on Education Abroad are specifically for U.S. Higher Education or do you have programs also for the rest of the world? If Yes, can you enumerate some of the contributions to HE systems worldwide?

Answer:

The Forum's work applies to all higher education institutions and organizations globally who are committed to high quality education abroad programs. At present, 130 universities and organizations from 40 different countries are Forum Members. Our institutional membership model makes participation in The Forum extremely affordable and benefits all faculty, administrators, and staff at an institution or organization.

A full list of member benefits can be found on our website at www.forumea.org. Highlights of which include:

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- Access to peers from around the world who convene in numerous virtual working groups, committees, and communities of practice as well as in-person at The Forum's Annual Conference, the largest conference in the United States focused solely on short term student mobility and education abroad, and numerous regional seminars and institutes.
- Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad a journal published by The Forum, recently released a special Issue on U.S. Education Abroad: The View from Europe. The special issue marks a pivotal moment in the ongoing effort to amplify European voices in education abroad scholarship. Practitioner-scholars and faculty from Forum Members are encouraged to submit articles for publication and are frequently invited to guest edit special issues.
- Regional Seminars - Developed with and for education abroad professionals in different regions of the world, Regional Seminars bring The Forum to the members for an affordable and convenient way to gather with local colleagues. The curated programming is designed to help tackle the most pressing challenges facing education abroad professionals in specific regions of the world. The next regional seminars will be held in Berlin and Rabat. Additional locations and dates will be announced in early July.
- Europe, Middle East, and Africa Conference (EMEA) – This conference unites three continents that meet around the Mediterranean Sea, in a region with geopolitical and economic ties, as well as a long and complex history of mobility and migration. The next EMEA Conference will take place in late 2026; more details will be available soon!

Question #9

And finally, how do you see the future of Higher Education *trends, policies,* and *priorities* within the context of the U.S. and Worldwide? (specifically based on your leadership and professional experience)

Answer:

We are living in a complex moment in time. As the value of higher education is being debated and politicized, it is urgent that higher education leaders around the globe understand when and how higher education is failing our students. We must be candid in assessing both our successes and our shortcomings and address known problems immediately. We must also reach out beyond our campuses to engage the broader community in the work of educating today's students. Higher education must face the realities of the looming enrollment cliff, students' changing priorities and demands that our institutions, including education abroad programs, be more environmentally sustainable. At the same time, we cannot ignore the financial crisis that is causing numerous institutions in the United States to close their doors

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or the staggering weight of student debt. With 40% of college students in the U.S. enrolled at community colleges, new pathways to baccalaureate degrees and new models for education abroad must be created.

International education is a potent antidote to nativism, isolation, and the dual scourge of racism and misogyny. Every student who goes abroad, whether they are from North America, Europe, Asia, Africa, Latin America or the Middle East has a unique opportunity to see the humanity of people whose circumstances and life experiences are completely different from their own. From my vantage point, having seen the transformative impact of international education on students from every background and socioeconomic status imaginable, I believe this work has never been more important.

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