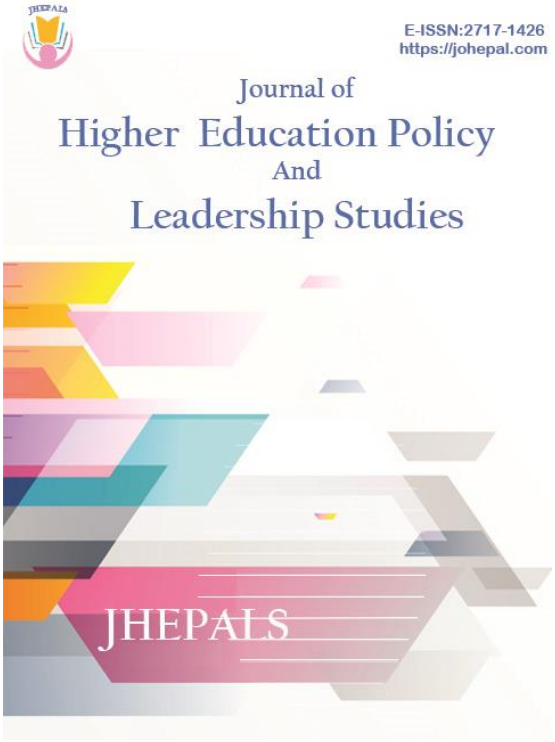
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International Education Leadership During COVID-19: An Interview with Dr. Wing-kai To

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Interview

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Wing-Kai To *



Dr. Wing-kai To has been involved in international higher education in the United States for more than two decades. He is the inaugural Assistant Provost for Global Engagement at Bridgewater State University since July 2018. Prior to this role he was a Professor of History and Academic Director in the Minnock Institute for Global Engagement.

As the Senior International Officer, Dr. To is responsible for overseeing international operations such as partnership and exchange agreements, global academic programs, study abroad, and international student and scholar services. He has led numerous travel courses with students, coordinated global learning opportunities, and developed international partnerships for more than fifteen years. His work with Association for International Education Administrators (AIEA), NAFSA-Association of International Educators, and the American Council on Education (ACE) have involved projects and participation in the Senior International Officer Academy, Internationalization Laboratory, Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL), and Community of Practice for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion. During the pandemic he has played a major role in implementing virtual exchange and COIL in the United States. For other professional roles he was a Fulbright Scholar to Hong Kong and Mandela Washington Exchange Fellow to Uganda and Cape Verde. He was also a consultant for the Chinese emigrant letters archives in China that were inscribed in the United Nations Memory of the World Register. His publications focus on virtual international exchange, history of Chinese and Japanese students and migration in the United States, as well as contemporary Asian American communities.

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It is an honor and privilege for us to host Dr. Wing-Kai To as a globally renowned scholar and higher education leader whose research, books, talks, interviews, and notes are extensively cited and acknowledged throughout the world with a research/ professional focus on *Internationalization of Higher Education, Global Mobility in HE,* and *Globalization*.

There is no doubt that all scholars and researchers worldwide are experiencing new challenges within this new era of Covid-19; hence, they might have much academic and administrative commitments to handle. We- at the Journal of Higher Education Policy and Leadership Studies- understand our esteemed authors and researchers' tough professional schedule; in this regard, we appreciate Dr. To's commitment to accept our invitation for December Issue (2021) interview.

We are sure that Dr. To's insightful, illuminating and critical responses to the following questions will be of interest to a broad audience of international researchers, students, policymakers, and leaders in Higher Education.

Question #1

As the Assistant Provost for Global Engagement and Senior International Officer at Bridgewater State University, what are your experiences about the leadership and governance of a higher education institute (HEI) in 21st century?
It would great if you could kindly help us imagine your lived experiences as a member of HEI leadership team.

Answer:

My academic and professional career has evolved in the field of international education for more than three decades. Growing up in Hong Kong, my first exposure to international higher education was the decision to pursue graduate studies as an international student in the University of California at Davis from 1988 to 1995. After living in California as an international student and working briefly in Minnesota for two years in my first teaching position, I have spent the last 24 years at Bridgewater State University in Massachusetts as a history professor, Asian studies program coordinator, global studies director, and currently as Assistant Provost for Global Engagement and Senior International Officer.

My experience in higher education governance and leadership has been influenced by my multiple roles as a teaching and research faculty member, international studies director, study abroad leader, international students' mentor, international partnership coordinator, and currently as the leader of my university in overseeing internationalization and global engagement. Internationalization of higher education in the United States is an integral part of university governance and strategic goals. Our efforts to internationalize our campus have included advancing global studies in the curriculum, supporting faculty global teaching and research, promoting student education abroad opportunities, fostering exchange and

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admission of international students, and developing global strategic and university partnerships. As a member of the Academic Affairs Division, I am dedicated to global learning and engagement that permeate the values and practices of our mission as a world-recognized, locally engaged and student-centered university.

As an international education leader in a US university, it is important for me to work collaboratively with other Deans and faculty members as well as develop external relations and international partnerships with colleagues all over the world. First of all, international education leaders are responsible for implementing the strategic plan and internationalization goals of the university. As a member of the Provost Council that provides academic leadership, I am committed to supporting academic excellence, innovation, and opportunities that broaden the horizons and contribute to the success of all our students. The benefits and learning outcomes of internationalization in higher education aim at educating our students to function effectively in a global society. Our learning objectives for global engagement support students to develop international awareness, intercultural competence and global citizenship to address world challenges and opportunities. Through global learning in the curriculum, study abroad opportunities, and interaction with international students, we empower both our faculty and students to interact and engage with peers, colleagues and partners all over the world. These strategic collaborations that are active, reciprocal and sustainable in nature are critical to the success of a globally engaged campus.

Secondly, international education leaders should work collaboratively with external entities and global partners well to benefit our institutions. The knowledge community in international higher education both in the United States and all over the world help higher education leaders to network and learn from each other. On any day a senior international officer in a US university may get to work with countries in all six continents on a regular basis through correspondence, networking, virtual meetings, and partnership visits. In addition to international students, international scholars, visitors, delegations, and partners all bring vitality to our campus through long-term studies and exchanges or short-term visits for meeting, lectures, workshops and conferences.

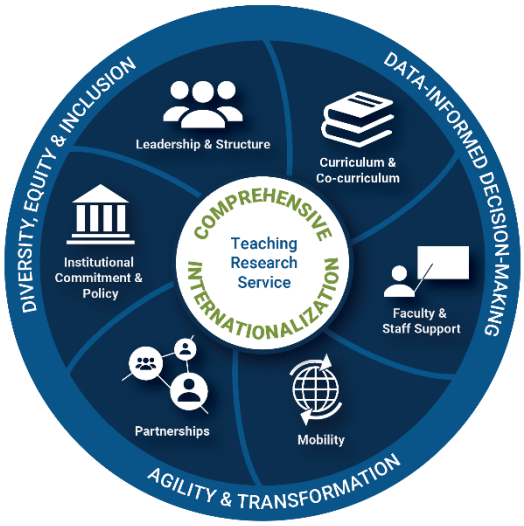
Thirdly, effective management of an international education team operation in our own campus also contributes to the success of governance in global engagement. The organizational structure of internationalization needs to permeate all areas of operation of the university. American Council on Education has developed a model of comprehensive internationalization that highlights six pillars of institutional commitment and policy, leadership and structure, curriculum and co-curriculum, faculty and staff support, mobility, and partnerships and networks. They are further augmented by three key principles of diversity, equity and inclusion, agility and transformation, and data-informed decision making (https://www.acenet.edu/Research-Insights/Pages/Internationalization/CIGE-Model-for-Comprehensive-Internationalization.aspx).

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This model has greatly informed higher education leadership and management in internationalization in the United States.

ACE Model for Comprehensive Internationalization



In short, my experiences coincide with the growth of internationalization of higher education over the last two decades. The field of higher education leadership in global engagement has become much more professional and specialized on the one hand, and more interdependent and connected to other higher education institutions in the world on the other. Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic has posed obstacles and challenges for this vision of comprehensive internationalization.

Question #2

What are the policy-making opportunities and administrative challenges of leadership and governance of a higher education institute in the COVID-19 era? How do you manage the challenges?

Answer:

Since March 2020 the COVID-19 pandemic has upended the growth of internationalization in higher education all over the world. When the pandemic first broke out in China in January 2020, subsequently in Europe such as Italy and Spain as well as in Asia such as South Korea in February and March 2020, we were concerned whether we could continue to send students abroad or bring students from these countries to the United States. Most of our international students left their homeland before the pandemic were able to study at Bridgewater State University, and we did send our students to Europe, Asia and around the world in January. Crisis management in March and April included efforts to evacuate and bring students back from study abroad locations between late February and late March, as

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well as safely returned international students to their home countries between mid-March and May. For those students who could not return home due to border closure and flight cancellations, we had to support them on campus and in the community to continue their studies. All these decisions of supporting students would involve multiple efforts of offering change of flights, conversion of in-person learning to an online curriculum, and financial loss of both the university and the students. Since June 2020 the attention of US universities shifted to remote learning for most of us throughout the next academic year from September 2020 to August 2021. We had to discuss issues of academic continuity and study options for both domestic and international students. We arranged virtual learning options for international students who could not return to the US while requiring all our students in the US to take synchronous or asynchronous virtual classes. For most of our campuses, we brought our students fully back in the classrooms beginning from fall 2021 while requiring vaccination and indoor masking. The uncertainty of COVID-19 pandemic around the world has severely impacted all our study abroad programs. Students could not study internationally for almost two years now with only a tiny percentage of students being allowed to study abroad this fall or next spring. The number of new international students has also been reduced dramatically between 2019 and 2021. More recently we are trying to resume our exchange programs and recruit and admit our international students to return to study in the US in 2022. Unfortunately, the continuation of the Delta and Omicron variants, the lagging vaccination rates in the United States and many countries in the world, as well as financial challenges of many universities will continue to hinder our efforts of recovery of international exchange and mobility in 2022.

In dealing with the crisis of international education during COVID-19, international education leaders need resilience, flexibility, adaptability and innovation in their decision-making, programs and policies, learning modalities, and partner relations. Instead of making our own decisions for international operations, we need to follow even more closely with broader university processes for risk management, health and safety, academic continuity, and coordination of the approval process. Each decision for resuming study abroad or international student support needs to be approved not only by the Provost as the Chief Academic Officer, but also needs to be approved by the university-wide Academic Continuity Committee and the Health and Safety Committee. In addition, senior international officers need to guide the education abroad and international student staff teams for their discussion and negotiation with study abroad providers, partner universities, as well as domestic and international students for advising, consultation and support. All these delicate decisions were influenced by university policies, local and national health and safety protocols, as well as international conditions that vary all over the world.

A successful international education leader needs to be well-informed, collaborative, and balanced in considering the needs and interests of stakeholders in the university, around the country and across the world. A transparent, communicative, and empirical international education leader can go a long way to reduce ambiguities and anxieties of administrators, faculty, and staff and students during a crisis period.

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In addition to effective communication and procedures for crisis management, international education leaders should support their staff, faculty and students with innovative ideas and solutions for continuing their work and studies. When staff were unable to work on the same tasks for advising or managing education abroad, one could assign them to work with faculty and partners on virtual curricular and co-curricular learning programs. For international students who were unable to return to the United States, international students support staff could work with them virtually for online course exchanges. While faculty were unable to travel to conduct their research or attend international conferences, we could develop other virtual lectures and meetings for them to engage with their international partners and collaborators.

While Senior International Officers and international staff were not able to travel abroad to work with partnerships and student recruitment, we could develop virtual partnership forum and meetings to discuss new ideas for collaborations. Last, but not least, while we were not allowed to travel to attend international education conferences with our local and international peers, we could maintain our networks and contacts through virtual peer learning and collaborations organized by our international education associations such as AIEA, NAFSA and other organizations.

Finally, in addition to changing practices of international education administration and operations, international education leaders could turn crises and challenges into new opportunities. During the last two years, the COVID-19 pandemic has led many international education leaders in the United States to incorporate virtual exchange and collaborative online international learning, as well as diversity, equity and inclusion into their new priorities. Let me explain these creative leadership and governance in more detail below.

Question #3

How do the creative leadership and governance of the Internationalization of Higher Education policies and programs occur during the COVID-19 era?
In the current crises, how do we can creatively manage the Internationalization of HE?

Answer:

COVID-19 has prompted many universities in the United States to implement more creative engagement outside travel with students, faculty, staff and partners in supporting internationalization. Perhaps the adoption of Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) and Virtual Exchange has been most successful in supporting global learning while we face challenges for student mobility. Even though the State University of New York (SUNY) Network and some universities such as DePaul University and Florida International University have long advocated virtual exchange and global virtual classrooms collaborations for many years, their efforts have now been expanded from a small circle of faculty practitioners to the mainstream of international education.

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Interview

The idea of virtual international exchange has become more prominent in the higher education community through the SUNY COIL Network, International Virtual Exchange Conference (IVEC), the Stevens Initiative, Uni Collaborations, and initiatives supported by such organizations as ACE, NAFSA, EAIE and AIEA etc.

Bridgewater State University has been engaged with COIL during the pandemic first through a grant supported by the American Council on Education in May 2020. It supported American and Japanese universities to work together as teams of international administrators and faculty members to develop course collaborations in COIL. I organized a team including one of our professors in education to collaborate with another professor from Tokyo Gakugei University in Japan on a course on virtual international exchange. They successfully implemented a COIL class for fall 2020 and repeated the same class for fall 2021. Over the period of about two months, their classes met three times together on zoom in joint classrooms and four other times between student groups of both American and Japanese students. Students were able to develop different learning outcomes of cultural exchange, problem solving, project-based learning, and joint presentations relating to different physical education curriculum in American and Japanese schools.

In addition to this class, we have implemented more than a dozen other COIL classes for virtual exchanges with different countries in Asia, Middle East, Europe, North America, and Latin America. These COIL courses explore different topics in political science, popular culture, foreign language learning, early childhood education, teaching English as a second language, intercultural communication and negotiation. All these courses received positive feedback from faculty and students who participated in virtual exchange to enhance their intercultural communication skills and interest in international engagement. As an international education leader in support of COIL and virtual exchange, I also participated in virtual presentations with international associations including the Fulbright Finland Foundation, AIEA, ACE, NAFSA, IVEC, and others. Both the international education administrators and the faculty members play critical roles in supporting creative engagement in virtual exchange and internationalization.

In addition to virtual exchange, higher education in the United States has focused more on diversity, equity and inclusion in addressing systemic racism in American society and the colonial legacy of oppression in international relations. In the past internationalization tended to focus more on the privileged nations and students while overlooking opportunities for lower-income and minoritized students. Virtual exchange has the potential of widening access to international engagement for students who could not afford to study abroad. Furthermore, international education leaders have begun to pay more attention to diversity in study abroad and critical internationalization for promoting an inclusive curriculum for students. Many universities have pledged to promote more ethical approaches to internationalization by addressing thorny issues of global challenges such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. More higher education institutions are developing more synergies between internationalization and DEI issues by supporting students of color and international students with more educational and financial resources.

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These efforts are meant to complement existing goals of global citizenship with additional equity and inclusive lens.

Question #4

What are the features and characteristics of "good" governance in higher education in the current pandemic and how does it happen in reality?

Answer:

The Association for International Education Administrators has developed a set of standards of professional practice for international education leaders and senior international officers. There are altogether 22 standards under the categories of internationalization expertise, leadership and management, advocacy and personal effectiveness. The knowledge and skills for international education leaders focus on important frameworks of comprehensive internationalization, global learning, risk management, legal compliance and research enterprise. Effective leadership and management rest upon various areas of strategic planning, administrative functions, professional development, internal and external communication, data assessment and inclusive governance.

Advocacy strategies support the enactment of institutional values, the agencies of students and faculty, and the collaboration with partnerships and external constituencies. The personal effectiveness of international education leaders also stems from possessing such qualities as resourcefulness and entrepreneurial spirit, intercultural competence and international experience, empathic instincts and ethical standards, and commitment to exchange of data, ideas and practices with other professionals.
(https://www.aieaworld.org/standards-of-professional-practice)

As the Senior International Officer in my university, I strongly believe in the above professional standards for governance and leadership in international education. With the pandemic we have been particularly challenged by risk and crisis management as well as reminded about the importance of empathy and effective communication in supporting our staff, faculty and students during difficult times. It is also important to share resources and address common challenges through peer learning and exchanges with other international education leaders in the field. As universities face difficult crises and constraints of student enrollment, budgetary shortfall, learning disruption, and declining morale in many parts of the world, a steady and well-coordinated team of higher education leaders can help to mitigate risks, stabilize operation, innovate learning and support resiliency.

There are profound challenges for smaller private colleges and lesser-known regional universities to compete with more well-endowed private universities and public flagship institutions. However, with effective leadership and governance many institutions such as Bridgewater State University have continued to persevere under difficult circumstances. I

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am proud of what we have continued to accomplish in global engagement over the last two years.

Question #5

What would you like to conclude about the future of the university governance in international education?

Answer:

After a decade of commercialization of higher education and cross-border international education in the 2010's, the future of international education over the next decade will continue to depend on good governance and effective leadership. This will entail making the right strategic choices for planning and investment, promoting enriching academic programs in international education, leveraging technologies for enhancing virtual international exchange, and developing rigorous and sustainable partnerships. For readers of this journal about international higher education policy, globalization and internationalization will continue to be influenced by the paradox between advances in technology and the equity gap of resources in the world.

Higher education in the United States has an obligation of fostering genuine, equitable, and reciprocal exchanges with nations around the world. International education should counter against the narrative of ethnocentrism and nationalism which pit national interests against international cooperation. However, one should not privilege the universalism of American higher education without understanding both the contributions and pitfalls of our educational system. In addition to internationalization in the United States, we need to learn about international higher education all over the world. It is in this spirit of cultural humility and exchange I offer my perspective on internationalization of higher education in the United States. I hope that my comments have been helpful to the readers. And I look forward to learning from other colleagues in international higher education studies in the future.

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