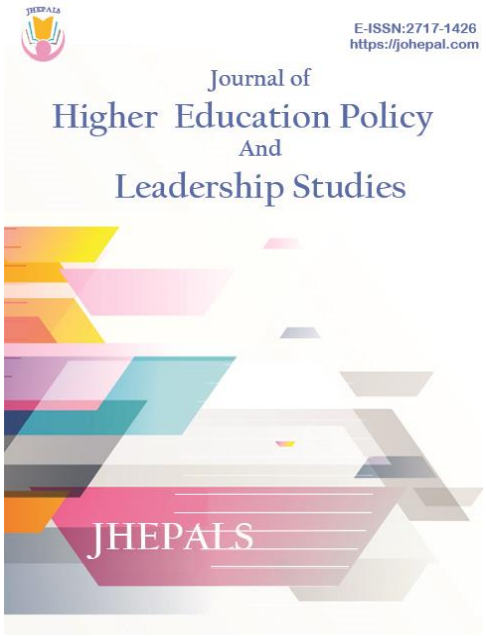
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Assessing the Internationalization of Higher Education: A Case Study of Three Universities in the Kentucky-Ohio Region

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Abstract

As students and scholars across the world have become increasingly mobile, higher education institutions have developed international education programming. While assessing the success of these efforts can be difficult in a field that literally encompasses the globe, the American Council on Education (ACE) has identified standard criteria to evaluate the internationalization of higher education in the US. In this study, materials from three university websites were gathered and assessed using the ACE model for comprehensive internationalization. The three institutions are: the University of Cincinnati, the University of Kentucky, and the University of Louisville. Further, a quantitative analysis was completed comparing the number of international and study abroad students at each institution. Results demonstrate a discrepancy in the success of international efforts between the University of Louisville and the other two universities, which can be attributed to differences in university structure. The findings illustrate the impact of university leadership and structure have in the internationalization of higher education.

Keywords: International Education; Internationalization; Higher Education Leadership; Southeastern US

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Introduction

One unseasonably warm day in November 2021, the University of Louisville unveiled its new branding. The angle of the late fall sun perfectly illuminated the new banners with their catchy marketing slogans on bold red backgrounds. Some banners featured the university's traditional red background shot through with a marbled flame-orange wing pattern. The imagery is a clear reference to the university's cardinal bird mascot, but it also subtly evokes the mythological phoenix. One of the slogans of this newly risen university was, "local roots, global impact." Considering the new marketing scheme was made public during International Education Week, it would be logical to assume the university was in tune with its international efforts. But like the beautiful, warm breeze on the cusp of winter disguises an uneasy truth about the physical environment, the brilliance of a branding campaign can conceal a tumultuous, ongoing struggle. In this case, not a single international affairs staff member had been consulted during the rebranding process, leaving them completely surprised at the declaration lining campus.

Frustrating though they may be, marketing campaigns are not a valid method to assess international education endeavors. However, the incongruency between the shiny new banners and a heavily siloed institution points to issues that can be assessed. Despite the complexities that arise from a field that connects widely disparate higher education institutions across the globe, there are common elements that must be present for an institution to internationalize successfully. In an homage to the opening lines of *Anna Karenina*, Nolan and Hunter (2012, p. 132) summarize this phenomenon as, "every successfully internationalized university will succeed in its own particular way; universities that fail to internationalize will fail in remarkably similar ways".

In the US, the American Council on Education (ACE) has developed a comprehensive framework for internationalization, which identifies standard criteria to assess international initiatives. ACE identifies six target areas in their comprehensive framework: institutional commitment and policy; leadership and structure; curriculum and co-curriculum; faculty and staff support; student mobility; and partnerships and networks (ACE Comprehensive Internationalization Framework). These areas address all populations of a campus community and capture the inter-related nature of a university ecosystem. The crucial component is the dedication of the university leadership. This study uses the ACE standards to assess and compare internationalization at the University of Louisville and two nearby institutions: the University of Cincinnati and the University of Kentucky.

Literature Review

The Impact of International Education

In recent decades, nearly every higher education institution has felt the pressure to internationalize as students and scholars across the world have become increasingly mobile (Rumbley et al., 2012). While supporting these students and promoting cross-cultural understanding are reasons to support internationalization, there are also measurable economic, academic, and professional benefits.

From a pragmatic standpoint, increased student mobility benefits the economy. In the United States, 4.6% of university students are international (IIE Open Doors, 2021), and

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international students brought $28.4 billion to the economy and supported 306,308 jobs in 2021. For every three international students, one job is supported in the spheres of higher education, accommodation, dining, retail, transportation, telecommunications, and health insurance. In the study areas, international students contributed $272.7 million to the economy in Kentucky and $858.4 million in Ohio (Benefits from International Students, 2021).

Additionally, US universities rely on international students as a revenue source. International students pay up to three times as much in tuition and fees as domestic students, accounting for 28% of tuition revenue (Loudenback, 2016). It is expected that American institutions' dependence on international students will only increase in the future, as the number of traditional domestic student enrollments is predicted to drop by 15% by 2025 due to a birth rate decline linked to the 2008 recession (Shroeder, 2021). In theory, a university with robust international education initiatives should attract and retain more international students and ameliorate the impact of the 2025 enrollment cliff.

The literature on outgoing American students focuses on the academic and professional success of students. On average, students who study abroad tend to have better grades, retain and graduate from college at a higher rate, and are employed at a higher rate after graduation compared to students who did not (IIE Generation Study Abroad, 2022). These benefits are even more impactful to underrepresented minority students and students receiving need-based financial aid. A 2020 study found that students who studied abroad were 6.2% more likely to graduate in four years, but when the data was subset to show the impact on underrepresented minorities and students receiving need-based financial aid, these students were 11.6% and 9.1% more likely to graduate in four years (Rubin and Bell, 2020). These studies demonstrate that participation in study abroad is a high impact practice that can help retain domestic students. In this way, study abroad can also contribute to higher education's efforts to mitigate the 2025 enrollment cliff.

Leadership in International Education

The need for robust leadership is implicit in Jane Knight's frequently cited definition of internationalization. Comprehensive internationalization is "the process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of postsecondary education" (Knight, 2003, p. 2). Hudzik (2015a; 2015b) also stresses that internationalization will fail if it is not integrated into a university's primary purposes of teaching, research and service; if it is seen as a separate goal, it will be set aside. For any item to be successfully integrated into a university's purpose, its leadership must be actively involved.

Effective change leadership and strong institutional culture are two factors upon which successful internationalization depends (Hudzik 2015a; 2015b). Culture and leadership are intrinsically linked, as an organization's culture comes from its leaders (Schein, 2010). Leaders create a vision, work with the community to generate buy-in, and ultimately ensure that the vision is carried out. The link between leadership and culture then becomes reflexive, with the culture influencing what kind of leadership is possible. Then, if parts of the culture become dysfunctional, it is up to the leaders to shift the culture and manage changes so the organization can survive (Schein 2010, p. 22). In a university, a culture that supports internationalization depends on top leadership (presidents, chief

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academic officers) to set the tone. These upper-level administrators are a source of leadership for internationalizing (Smithee, 2012), though Hudzik (2015a; 2015b) emphasizes that leadership from the middle (directors and chairs) and bottom (individual faculty, staff, and students) is also needed to carry out the work of internationalization.

While involvement of key stakeholders throughout the university is essential to successful internationalization, leadership from the top is often the prime driver. The most recent ACE survey of US colleges found that university presidents are top catalysts for campus internationalization (Matross Helms et al., 2017). A case study of four universities in the US and Europe found that though each institution's cultures, leadership styles, and structure were different, their successful international efforts were driven by top leadership (Nolan and Hunter, 2012). It is worth noting that success depended on the quality of the leadership rather than the structure of the institution; at the decentralized University of Michigan, the dean of the College of Art and Design came into the job expecting to internationalize the college and did so successfully (Nolan and Hunter, 2012).

On the one hand, University of Michigan is proof of Hudzik's (2015a) assertion that centralization is less important than the matrices of connections through a university. On the other hand, many universities find centralizing international education near the top of the institution to be helpful. At Colorado State University, positioning the international unit under the provost "signified collaboration and enhanced accountability, understanding, and mutual cooperation between academics and the [international affairs staff]" (Bjorklund 2019, p. 11). This same study revealed that the strong institutional mission and narrative influenced nearly all international activities at Colorado State (Bjorklund, 2019), revealing that internationalization is integrated into the university's purpose. Further, centralizing international initiatives under one administrator known as a Senior International Officer (SIO) has helped many universities successfully internationalize (Matross Helms et al., 2017; Bjorklund, 2019). SIOs were listed as the number two catalyst for internationalization overall, and the number one catalyst in doctoral institutions. The SIO position is technically a middle manager between university administration and international affairs staff, but they provide a university's upper administration with valuable perspective on the opportunities and pitfalls involved in global initiatives. In addition, SIOs can be active agents of change, especially when they regularly interact with other campus leaders (Nolan & Hunter, 2012; Heyl & Tullbane, 2012).

Research Methodology

This paper presents a case study of the internationalization of three universities using the ACE comprehensive framework for internationalization as a rubric: the University of Cincinnati (UC), the University of Kentucky (UK), and the University of Louisville (UofL). These institutions are in close geographic proximity, are public universities, and are large doctoral institutions with a Carnegie Research I (R1) designation. Based on these factors, each university has similar goals and struggles. For example, as public universities, they are subject to their state's policies and shifting budget cuts, and they are all in metropolitan areas in a state with many rural and Appalachian counties.

ACE's six target areas for institutions to successfully internationalize (institutional commitment and policy; leadership and structure; curriculum and co-curriculum; faculty and

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staff support; student mobility; partnerships and networks) each have specific goals under them a university should strive for (ACE Comprehensive Internationalization Framework, see Table 1).

Table 1.
ACE Comprehensive International Framework target areas and goals

Target Area	Goals
Institutional Commitment & Policy	International included on university strategic plan *
Leadership & Structure	International committee or task force* International Leadership that reports to president or chief academic officer* Adequate human & financial resources
Curriculum & Co-Curriculum	Undergraduate/first degree compulsory international curriculum* Courses in each major, program, discipline incorporate international aspects Co-curriculum programs and activities address global issues Technology used in innovative ways to enhance global learning
Faculty & Staff Support	International work and experiences included in tenure and promotion decisions Hiring guidelines include international and diverse backgrounds in criteria Faculty & Staff mobility (opportunities and funding) * On-campus professional development*
Student Mobility	Inclusive accessibility Funding and financial aid for both incoming and outgoing students* Ongoing support programs for international students* Orientation and re-entry programs
Partnerships & Networks	International Partnerships* Local and community partnerships Internal institution networks

*Indicates a measure evaluated in this analysis

Using nine of these goals as a rubric, materials were gathered over the Spring 2022 term from each university's website to form an archive and a basis to assess their internationalization.

Many of the standards chosen are simple yes/no questions, and all are items that are easy to access on university websites. Some of the standards not chosen are beyond the scope of this analysis, such as "every major has an international aspect." Others are difficult to analyze via online materials, such as "sufficient financial and human resources" or "international activities included in tenure and promotion policies."

Results

UK met all ACE standards assessed, with the possible exception of internationalization on the strategic plan, as it is only mentioned as a secondary goal. However, the previous plan for 2015-2020 included goals for better international student recruitment and internationalized curriculum (Strategic Plan UK). UC achieves most ACE standards. Their

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strategic direction does not mention internationalization, but UC International argues that internationalization is implicit in the goals of increasing co-curricular experiences and cultural competency (UC International). UC also may fall short on the curricular goals, as only two out of three choices of the required "contemporary topics" courses contain exposure to global ideas, whereas all undergraduate students at UK and UofL must take a global dynamics/diversity course (General Education Core; UK Core; Cardinal Core).

UofL met both the strategic plan and curricular goals, but it falls short in ways UC and UK do not. The structure of the UofL International Center at the time of the study was decentralized, with no SIO and no direct reporting line to the president or provost of the university. Instead, the international offices reported separately to the Vice President of Student Affairs. There was no funding for incoming students, outgoing students, or for faculty who want to support internationalization. There was no ESL program for international students. The support structure for international partnerships was one study abroad advisor who both managed partnerships and advised students (International Student and Scholar Services; Office of Study Abroad). UC and UK have SIOs who report to the provost, funding for incoming and outgoing students, funding for faculty, and a staff member dedicated to maintaining international partnerships in an office separate from study abroad.

Table 2.
Universities assessed with ACE goals

Target Area	Goal Assessed	UC	UK	UofL
Institutional Commitment & Policy	International included on Strategic plan	International initiatives not mentioned in Strategic Direction, and SIO not included as part of the leadership team that developed the plan.	International is mentioned in UK's strategic plan as a secondary concern of supporting diverse students, reaching out to alumni around the world, and incentivizing research.	International mentioned in UofL's strategic plan under the goals of increasing non-traditional student enrollment and experiential learning opportunities.
Leadership & Structure	International committee or task force	International task force with eight members, plus seven region-specific strategy groups with 100+ UC employees and Cincinnati community members focused on developing and maintaining collaborations in their group's region.	International task force with representatives from each unit on campus. Eight subcommittees to address specific issues in internationalizing, such as global health.	International task force with a representative from each unit of the university, plus a committee dedicated to international student recruitment.

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	International leadership that reports to president or provost	UC International has four different offices: International Admissions, International Services, International Planning, and Study Abroad. SIO is Assistant Vice Provost of International Affairs and Honors and reports to the provost.	UK's International Center has seven offices: International Partnerships & Research, Education Abroad, International Students & Scholar Services, Office of China Initiatives, Global Health Initiatives, Faculty & Staff Resources, and International Health, Safety, & Security. SIO is Associate Vice Provost for Internationalization and reports to the provost.	UofL's international Center is two offices: International Student & Scholar Services and Study Abroad & International Travel. At the time of the study, two international offices reported separately to the Vice President of Student Affairs, who has a dual reporting line to the president and provost.
Curriculum & Co-Curriculum	Undergraduate/first degree compulsory international curriculum	Undergraduate students are required to take two "contemporary topics" courses. There are three categories to pick from: diversity equity and inclusion; society, culture, and ethics; and technology and innovation.	Undergraduate requirements include a "global dynamics" course. Some examples of courses that count for this credit are global literature courses, culture courses (e.g. Russian folklore), or social science courses about globalization.	Undergraduate requirements include a global diversity course. Courses that count as for this credit are typically in the arts, humanities, or social sciences.
Faculty & Staff Support	Faculty & Staff mobility (opportunities and funding)	Funding for faculty to develop study abroad programs and new partnerships.	Grants to teach abroad and develop study abroad courses. External international research funding is also centrally advertised by the International Center	Faculty have opportunities to research and teach abroad, but there is no centralized funding for such initiatives.
	On-campus professional development	Resources to support students on one landing page. These cover topics like communicating across culture barriers and understanding travel restrictions to better promote study abroad. "Study abroad for advisors" program allows academic advisors to learn about study abroad to help students and build relationships with UC's global partners.	Global Engagement Academy program is a set of free courses with the option to obtain a certificate. Topics range from understanding how UK is internationalized, to trends in international education, to how to support students. There is also the opportunity to apply for a grant to support faculty/staff member's professional development.	The Office of Study Abroad & International Travel hosts professional development workshops for employees. Workshops are focused on ensuring that employees are aware of university travel policies, with no incentive or reward for attending.

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Student Mobility	Funding and financial aid for both incoming and outgoing students	UC International has scholarship funding for both international students and study abroad students.	UK International Center has scholarship funding for both international students and students who want to study abroad	No information on international student scholarships. No study abroad scholarships offered through Office of Study Abroad & International Travel, but other funding sources linked.
	Ongoing support programs for international students	UC International sponsors a student group that helps international students acclimate to the US. ESL and Accelerated College English courses available, and training sessions offered to faculty on tips like building cross-cultural understanding or Chinese culture and name pronunciations.	Programs include a "first friend," a community volunteer who involves an international student in ordinary parts of their life. There is also a Center for ESL and workshops for faculty and staff to support them.	There is one international student group with limited information posted online. No ESL program. The International Student & Scholar Services allows UofL departments to request trainings on visa requirements.
Partnerships & Networks	International Partnerships	Managed by International Planning office. This office of seven (including the SIO) is responsible for the marketing and operations for UC International and includes a Director of Strategic Partnerships. There are thirteen strategic partnerships, which is "a small number of comprehensive, long-term partnerships."	Maintained by the International Partnerships & Research office maintains. This office comprises a director and a partnership manager. A database of existing partnerships is online behind a UK login, but there is a map of current partnerships available to the public.	There is one employee in the Office of Study Abroad who maintains current partnerships and processes new requests on top of advising study abroad students. Current partnerships are not listed online, nor is there a portal where UofL students and employees can log in and see a list of them.

Sources: (UC: About UC; Next Lives Here; UC International; General Education Core. UK: About the Office of the Provost; Strategic Plan UK; International Center; UK Core. Uofl: About UofL; Strategic Plan UofL; International Affairs Advisory Committee; Cardinal Core; Student Affairs Organizational Charts; International Student and Scholar Services; Office of Study Abroad)

Further, a quantitative analysis of the three institutions shows that there is a disparity between UofL and the other two universities (See Figures 1 and 2). Data from the previous five years of data available at the time of the study illustrates the trends in student numbers pre-COVID as well as how each institution has fared during the pandemic. The data is normalized by the total student body to mitigate statistical bias. UofL's percentage of international students remains at a steady plateau of about 50% lower than UK's, which is far greater than the disparity between UK and UC's numbers. Likewise, UofL's study abroad

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percentages begin only slightly lower than UK's. Then in academic year 2017-18, the gap between the two institutions grows larger.

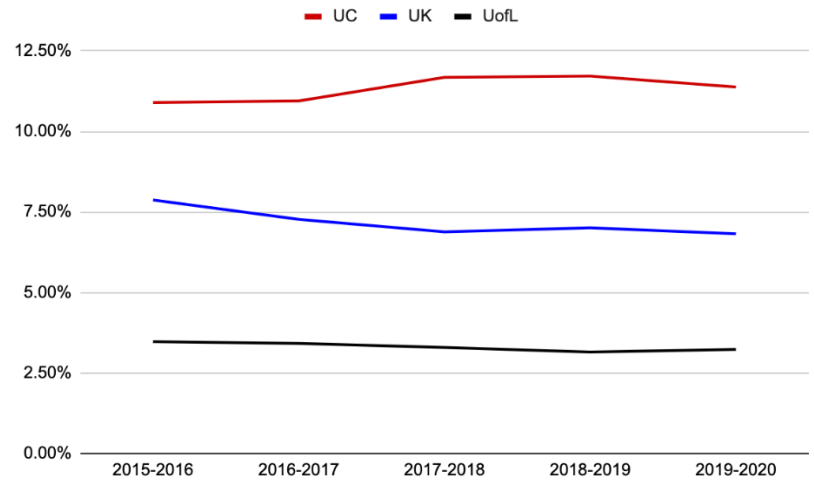


Figure 1. International Student Population as % of the Student Body*
(Data sources: IIE Open Doors, UC, UK, and UofL common data sets.)

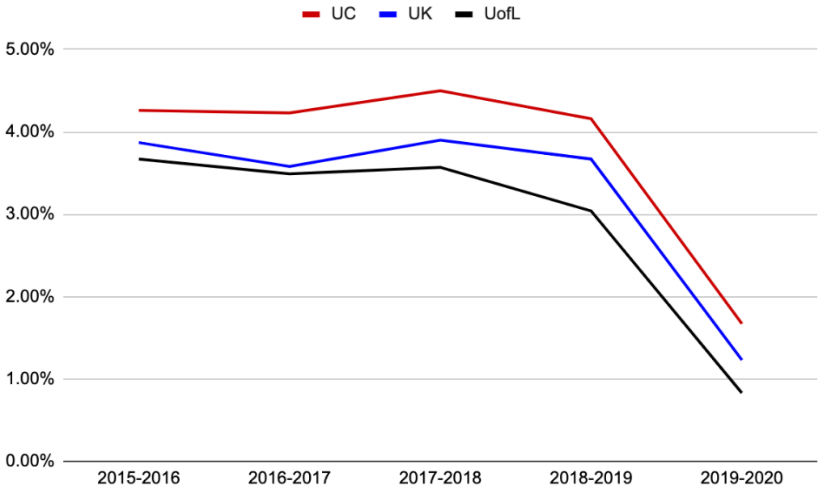


Figure 2. Percentage of Student Body who Studied Abroad*
(Data sources: IIE Open Doors, UC, UK, and UofL common data sets.)

*Data uses academic year with a trailing summer (i.e. runs from the start of the Fall term until the last day before the start of the next Fall term)

Discussion

While Hudzik (2015a) and the University Michigan College of Art and Design's success (Nolan & Hunter, 2012) posit that centralization is not required in international education, this analysis demonstrates why it is often preferred in larger doctoral colleges. The effects of

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structural differences between UofL and the other two institutions is apparent. At UC and UK, there is an SIO, who is at the same level as a dean. This structure allows university leadership to invest in international initiatives the same way they would academics. By contrast, UofL's student affairs approach to international education actively hinders its internationalization. Although general student services are a part of international education, student affairs is different in scope and misses essential academic tie-ins. Consequently, the "faculty and staff support" and "partnerships" sections of ACE's framework are almost entirely neglected at UofL.

Interestingly, UC has some structural similarities to UofL. Their SIO administers the Honors program in addition to UC International, and UC also only has one staff member dedicated to partnerships. However, UC meets the employee support and partnership ACE goals. Regarding the former, Honors programs are generally academic adjacent and allow for experiential learning opportunities, which may make them a better fit with international education than student affairs. Regarding the partnerships, UC's single position is not split between two different functions, and they have the support of the SIO and the International Planning office. As a result, UC has a clearly articulated vision on building intentional partnerships.

UofL's lack of support for faculty and staff inhibits comprehensive internationalization in two ways. First, faculty members have frequent contact with students in a way that administrators and international education staff do not. Faculty who are incentivized to teach and/or research abroad will likely encourage their students to participate in international endeavors. Second, it means that attempts of "leadership from the bottom" are not supported or acknowledged. Leadership may flow in all directions as per Hudzik (2015a, 2015b), but this case study illustrates that leadership from the bottom does not work without the support of leadership from the top.

Most explanations for UofL falling short of the ACE standards have their root cause in university leadership. The budget crisis of 2016-2017 is a prime example. At that time, a seemingly endless string of scandals was uncovered, namely, millions in misappropriated funds by then-president James Ramsey and his cabinet (Yetter, 2016). Funding for an SIO position, scholarships, and other international projects existed, but the money went elsewhere. This is the same period where we see UofL's study abroad percentages start to drop beyond what would be expected in the national trends (Figure 2). Since Ramsey's resignation, UofL's leadership has not been stable, with five presidents since 2016 (Just the Facts). Conversely, UK's Eli Capilouto has been the president since 2011 (About the President), and UC's Neville Pinto has been president since 2017 after serving as one of UofL's interim presidents (Office of the President).

Like all studies, there are limitations to this analysis. More research is needed to understand initiatives or issues not posted on online, to determine if the students and employees feel like internationalization is truly integrated at their university, and to evaluate how well each institution's leadership implements and maintains their strategic vision. Further, it is likely that ACE's framework reproduces functionalist, de-politicized, and colonial discourses of internationalization (see Buckner & Stein, 2020). It was beyond the scope of this study to investigate how these discourses and assumptions shape the ACE standards and this analysis; future research in this arena would be illuminating.

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This study captures a moment in time, and therefore misses milestones in each university's internationalization process before and after Spring of 2022. For example, UK's 2009 strategic plan for internationalization is featured on the ACE website as a model for other institutions (ACE), and UofL's leadership shifts have led to numerous changes in the International Center since 2022. Despite its limitations, the results of this study illustrate the effects of leadership and structure on the internationalization of higher education.

Conclusion

Next to the vibrant "local roots, global impact" marketing banner, sits a cold room in the library basement filled with the comforting smell of books. The practical, windowless space could not be more different than the breezy outside, but the yellowing records reveal crumbs of the true story of internationalization at UofL. A typewritten letter from an administrator shows that the place of the International Center in UofL's structure has been in question since at least 1998. Local newspaper clips report on budget cuts and discussions to close the International Center in the early 90s (Brodschi Hall). While student affairs celebrated the addition of two international positions in 2021, pixelated staff photos from the annual reports show that the new staff brought numbers equal to where they were in 1980 (International Center Annual Reports 1979-1980).

Schein (2010) states that institutional structures must be consistent with the organization's goals for leader-managed culture change to be successful, which means aspirational marketing cannot be effective without structural support. Furthermore, in her autoethnography of a former workplace, Best (2018) found that when a conflict of motivations is built into an organization's structure, the tensions are irresolvable. She was describing the tension of for-profit university employees navigating a dual reporting structure to the Academic Council (academically focused) and the Board of Directors (marketing and finance focused). To some extent, this conflict of motivations is present in all of American higher education, but the situation Best details is particularly analogous to UofL's International Center. There is a structural imbalance in trying to meet the demands of both student affairs and international education best practices. These structural issues hold UofL back from achieving internationalization at the level of UK or UC.

Schein (2010) also asserts that leaders' reactions to crises are significant in shaping the organization's culture. UC, UK, and UofL have undergone the same national funding crises in higher education, and each institution's response to these crises set the tone for their culture moving forward. While all three universities may have cut funding to international education to survive, only UofL has housed their international unit so far away from key university leaders. As we enter the new crisis of the 2025 enrollment cliff, many universities will turn to internationalization as a solution. UK and UC's leadership structure may allow them to succeed with relative ease, while UofL will likely require a culture shift towards internationalization if it is to be a viable solution for them.

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Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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Human Participants

There were no human participants in this study; however, necessary ethical guidelines are observed the researcher.

Originality Note

The author confirms that the research is her original work; and proper citations are included where others' works are cited.

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