

The State of International Affairs: An Update

Global impact of COVID-19 continues to evolve and remain unpredictable. What we know today is that a number of factors - such as ability to obtain US visas, staffing levels at embassies, flight availability, operating status of host institutions, available resources to support social distancing and other measures to protect public health – continue to influence the state of international education in the U.S. Another significant factor has been uncertainties surrounding the future of U.S. visa policies for international students and scholars. It has been difficult to keep abreast of ever changing and never-ending flip-flops on immigration, but our ISSS team has remained diligent and effectively served our international students and scholars during these and confusing times.

Most universities have experienced a decline in new international student enrollment for Fall 2020. National numbers are yet to be published, but some of our peers are down by 20-25%. Because of around the clock hard work of our recruiting and admissions team, we are only about 10% below the Fall 2019 total international enrollment. Our international scholars program, no doubt, will take a bigger hit. We attract about 150-200 outstanding international scholars per year to collaborate with our faculty on high-impact research programs. At this time, given uncertainties about J visas and misgivings about proper handling of proprietary research and intellectual properties by a few, it does not look like we will have many international scholars on our campus in 2021. We will continue to work hard and adapt to ensure that these disturbing trends are reversed.

The Department of State has lifted the Global 4 Health Advisory and has returned to the previous system of country-specific levels of travel advice (with Levels from 1-4 depending on countryspecific conditions). However, most countries currently have a Level 3 travel advisory (reconsider travel). We are now evaluating international travel applications on a case-by-case basis using a variety of factors such as Department of State travel advisories, travel notices from the CDC, and COVI-19 trends at travel destinations.

As I have said before, we are now accepting applications for study abroad programs in 2021, starting with the Spring semester, under some very stringent safety protocols and guidelines. We are currently preparing for 22 programs in 11 destinations (including the Seville Center) for Spring 2021. By the way, did you know that we have a total of 182 SA programs in 58 destinations on the books for students to choose from? It is encouraging to see that student interest for an international experience has remained high. Final numbers will change, but as of the October application deadline, we have had 110 expressions of interest for Spring 2021. This compares with 105 students whose study abroad programs were interrupted last Spring due to the pandemic.

Our international research and development efforts have been minimally impacted by the COVID-19 outbreak. We just received a half a million dollar award from the U.S. Department of State to lead a comprehensive professional development training for Ethiopian higher education administrators. Many other grant proposals are either on review or in different stages of completion. A team of our faculty and staff are also working diligently to take full advantage of the Fulbright Scholar Program for both outbound and inbound exchanges.

The 2020 Mandela Washington Fellowship for Young African Leadership program (YALI) and the Water Advanced Research and Innovation (WARI) Fellowship Program got postponed, but we are fully prepared to host the Indian WARI scientists for the first time and the young African leaders for the third time here in Lubbock in 2021. Another initiative that has been delayed in implementation is the Global Bridge Certificate Program that was instituted in 2019, to allow international undergraduate students to earn a graduate certificate while earning credits for a graduate degree at TTU.

The International Center for Arid and Semi-Arid Land Studies (ICASALS) and the Center for Global Communication (CGC) continue to serve their constituents with relevant academic, research, and outreach initiatives. The Master of Science in Arid Land Studies enrolled four new students this Fall after years of inactivity. ICASALS started a new seminar series and has been active in writing grant proposals focused on the study of the human relationships with arid and semiarid environments from an international perspective. The first ICASALS seminar was offered virtually on September 23, 2020, and we plan to offer similar webinars each month going forward. CGC, after being merged with OIA on September 1, continues with its mission to support the University's commitment for effective student communication within a global context with a renewed emphasis on curriculum internationalization.

We are slowly bringing back our internationally-themed outreach – exhibits, cultural programs, speaker series, etc. International Week, Culture Fest, and Open House are all scheduled for the end of October. Adventures in Study Abroad and My Hometown Photography Exhibit was recently put up on our foyer walls and is currently available for virtual [online](#). Moreover, we have started planning for our highly sought-after annual Ambassadors Forum for March 2021. This will be the 5th year of its inauguration. The K-12 Global Education Outreach Program has once again begun offering educational and cultural programs to K-12 students from public, private, and home schools throughout the South Plains. All these outreach and engagement programs are meant to enhance global literacy and infuse global competency. Stay tuned for more details of these celebrations under a new normal.

The Passport Office is currently open to the public by appointment only. ICC rental facilities are also available at limited capacities. You can be assured that we have worked diligently to create a safe and accommodating way to host events, while maintaining social distancing and keeping our staff and visitors safe and healthy. No doubt, the last few months have been different and difficult, and no one knows whether we will ever go back to a “normal” that we were used to.

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But we are not waiting around twiddling our thumbs for things to go back to normal. We are taking this as an opportunity to bring about optimal changes to continue and enhance internationalizing our campus and peoples. I am confident we will accomplish many more great things working as a team toward a common vision. As the 20th century American poet, Mattie Stepanek, has written, “Unity is strength...when there is teamwork and collaboration, wonderful things can be achieved.”

Sukant Misra, Ph.D.
Vice Provost for International Affairs