

## Promoting Campus Internationalization through Internationally Themed Art Exhibits and Events

Joan Goodman-Williamson and Sukant Misra

At Texas Tech University, JOAN GOODMAN-WILLIAMSON, PHD, is executive director for international relations and outreach and SUKANT MISRA, PHD, is vice provost for international affairs.

Colleges and universities across the globe have taken up the challenge of internationalizing their academic programming and engagement. Many embrace internationalized curriculum and co-curriculum to ensure that all students are exposed to international perspectives and build global competence. Clearly, many of these efforts focus on the academic content, and the results look different as they reflect and reinforce the needs of each institution. This is great, and we have much to learn from one another. But in addition to the three Rs (*reading, writing and arithmetic*), success for global citizens in the 21<sup>st</sup> century must include the four Cs: *critical thinking, creativity, communication and collaboration* – which exposure to the arts can advance. According to a report released by the National Assembly of State Arts Agencies, *Critical Evidence*, “study of the arts in its many forms...is increasingly accepted as an essential part of achieving success in school, work, and life.”

### **Valuing the Arts – Promoting Understanding**

Artworks and artists, as proponents of international exchange, play a vital part in promoting international understanding, said Noel Lateef, president of the U.S.-based Foreign Policy Association at a recent symposium in China. “[T]he role of international exchange has never been more important to the world peace,” he said.

At Texas Tech University, the Office of International Affairs (OIA) promotes international understanding through dedicated internationally themed exhibits and events. Housed in the International Cultural Center (ICC) building, which opened in 1996, the OIA provides a continual series of internationally-themed conferences, lectures, art exhibitions and performances. The building itself sets the tone for promoting understanding through intentionally international engagement. As part of the University’s Public Art program on campus, welcoming visitors to ICC stands a 12 foot stainless steel globe just west of the building. Inside, the Hall of Nations is a rotunda and features flags of nations of the world and a terrazzo floor representing the continents, oceans and seas of the world. But what really differentiates OIA from so many others across the country is the space dedicated to curating internationally themed exhibitions. Photographic and art exhibits can be viewed in both the east and west galleries and on the walls encircling the globe in the Our World Room. More than 35,000 people are served through the center annually.

## **It's a Dialogue**

Dr. Michael Galyean, Provost of Texas Tech University notes that “internationalization is a dynamic, creative process, not simply a set of isolated activities.” Part of that dynamic process is the curating of internationally themed exhibits throughout the year. With more than 210 linear feet and 1680 square feet of exhibition wall space, our galleries feature a variety of exhibits focusing on multi-cultural content that highlight the complex and fascinating cultures and traditions around the world. Visitors can wander and chart their paths spatially through ever-evolving exhibitions designed to stimulate and encourage a more open-minded exchange of views, ideas, cultural shifts, and understanding.

The dialogue of internationally themed exhibitions and activities involves collaboration with partners from across the university and the community – all of whom can contribute to the internationalization of our campus. Each year OIA displays eight to ten art exhibits with international themes in the galleries of ICC. Although many of our exhibits are “one time only,” some exhibits are displayed every year, and all exhibits and receptions are free and open to the public.

## **A Demand for new approaches**

The challenges of the global pandemic of 2020 demanded new approaches to continue our mission of promoting cultural awareness. In the wake of limited gatherings, closed facilities, and disrupted travel across the world, the Office of International Affairs made purposeful shifts in the design, medium, and structure of its outreach. We used our existing programming as pillars to discover new ways to meet the challenges. We identified how the conventions of outreach shape and are shaped by our practices and purposes as well as our audience's expectations. We synthesized that information and developed alternative structural changes and modalities to meet a variety of situations and contexts.

To meet our outreach mission, the Office of International Affairs determined some of the key concepts of our work to guide our new strategies. As an office, we wanted to capitalize on our experience, our new working circumstances, and our combined strength. We dedicated time and space (e.g. online, on the phone) during working hours for teams to adapt to the situation, talk to and support each other, and explore solutions together. This increased collaborative approach led to new approaches that could lessen our staff's workload or efforts by exploring new tools and revisiting traditional ones.

## **Keep in Close Contact with communities and partners**

Our partners and our communities are our audience and the impetus for our programming, so we understood we needed to increase our contact and provide information that was both informative and supportive. Our communities and partners include our international students, scholars and alumni, our

University faculty, staff, and larger student body, the local community members, businesses and school districts, and our artists both locally and abroad. We focused on our outreach to them and their concerns. Increased 2020 contact initiatives included:

1. An update at the top of our Home Page that gave the latest updates on COVID and links to available resources through the OIA
2. Personalized emails from the Vice Provost to international student communities whose home countries have been hit with extraordinary strife
3. The continuation of our bi-monthly newsletters to the University community
4. Increased email and virtual meetings with partners and grantors
5. Strategic planning with partners for events where the modality would be altered to virtual
6. A new page on our website that highlighted best practices across our units and activities

As part of our ongoing activities, the OIA holds an annual competition to celebrate our international students, scholars and study abroad programs. The *Adventures in Study Abroad/My Hometown* Photography Exhibit features approximately 70 of the best photographs from Texas Tech students' study abroad experiences and Texas Tech international students' and scholars' hometowns. Other annual exhibits enter the dialogue from a regional aspect or with a focus on what defines our place in the world. Since 1999, OAI has celebrated *Día de los Muertos Procesión* (Day of the Dead) with art exhibits, special programs and an annual procession in collaboration with the Texas Tech School of Art and art centers in Lubbock. This Mexican tradition and holiday which celebrates the circle of life and death is recognized by UNESCO in the list of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity and is particularly important to Texas Tech as a designated Hispanic Serving Institution.

### **Inspire and Engage**

In 2020, we needed new approaches to these standing, and much anticipated activities. Whether we were looking for substantive change or a viable new approach to accomplish our goals, we reminded ourselves that our brainstorming, just like internationalizing our campus, is a dynamic process, not a static or isolated response. **Solutions could be simple or more complex – the goal was to be a powerful source of inspiration and engagement.** Some of our dreams that became realities included:

1. Inviting the community to share in an international musical journey by sending in their favorite international music to become part of an accessible playlist on Spotify
2. Opening up our galleries during evening hours and with safety protocols in place including limited number of viewers at a time so that exhibits could be viewed in person by those who had

a particular interest. For example, the Adventures in Study Abroad and My Hometown was opened to our student and international scholar community; our Dia de los Muertos exhibit was opened to the families of students whose photographs were featured in the show; our High & Dry Exhibit will be opened to the artists who participated as well as other community members)

3. Creating our first OIA International Family Cookbook and shared that with community members who are mostly cooking more at home to address the idea of global literacy by exploring new tastes

The pedagogy behind the internationally themed exhibits is to embrace the richness of cultures and celebrate them – not to try to compare one place to another or one belief to another. Central to the dialogue is that our students, whether domestic or international, experience a better understanding of their place in their culture as well as an understanding of a different place or a new culture – and thus are, creating diversity and expressive plurality. To meet the new realities of engagement in 2020, and to ensure that we offered positive and new approaches to cultural competency and inclusivity, we recognized that often it is **the exploration itself of what has never been that can enable something new to emerge**. Thinking about what we do best is critical; however, that should not create a pressure to walk away from those activities or to feel compelled to replace them with new activities or innovations. Our goal was to, when possible, find new approaches, fresh ideas to deliver our content and message, and ways to diversify our approaches to our outreach.

This simple reminder, coupled with our desire to capitalize on the shared experience of a the 2020 new normal for our staff produced an increased interest in how we responded to the challenges of safety as part of our outreach and some startling and creative ideas to accomplish those goals.

1. We turned our K-12 in-house and in-school programming workshops into online tutorials with appropriate materials kits so students could complete activities at home
2. Our admissions team developed a series of virtual informational sessions with students across the globe
3. We developed a hybrid Study Abroad program and continue to refine that idea
4. We increased our social media output and online platform to include all of our exhibits (current, future, and some past) so that our communities could view the works.
5. We hosted a virtual reception for artists and the community to engage with each other and our expert competition judge,
6. We instituted the first “Drive Through” Open House and partnered with local restaurants to offer discounts to those who attended – thus supporting local businesses as we highlighted different cuisines.

Cultural competence cannot simply be taught and enacted, it must be embodied—we must live it. It includes the ability to reflect and exploring to discover new ways of being and of taking action.

### **Lessons Learned**

1. *Intentionality in avoiding negative stereotypes* -- Displays must tell a positive story and make the storyteller proud - there is nothing to celebrate about miseries and hunger around the world despite how worthwhile a cause it may be.
2. *Begin with the communities you have* – Buy-in through collaboration is key to success and outreach. Communities can include departments, student groups, local school districts, external partners in the community, or even global partners.
3. *Make the events worth the while and allow new ideas to emerge* – our exhibits often include panel discussions, talks, screenings, receptions and other events to explore beyond the images and question the dominance of culturally-centered norms or perceptions, and the challenges of 2020 allowed us to expand how we present these exhibits.
4. *Plan with calendar* – we plan our exhibitions anywhere from 6-18 months out and look strategically at how to capitalize on institutional priorities as well as cultural celebrations, but we know we must also be able to pivot quickly as things arise – a calendar is essential!