

# Taking the First Steps Toward Internationalization

## The Fundamental Role of Educational Diplomacy

By Dr. María Luisa Gutiérrez Peart

In February 2017, I had the opportunity to visit the United States as member of the Argentine university mission. This interesting U.S. Embassy initiative highlights the fundamental role of educational diplomacy in the internationalization of higher education.

Nowadays, having the internationalization of institutions as an objective, principals or presidents can sign cooperation agreements or memorandums of understanding (MOU). They can also disseminate information related to courses or seminars organized in foreign universities, and host foreign students coming for summer or winter courses, which in most cases are offered by educational service providers. However, none of these activities, or all of them together, could completely guarantee a close, long-lasting, reciprocal and successful relationship between U.S. and foreign institutions.

On the contrary, successful partnerships between institutions are founded on an ethical basis that is respectful of the “other” institution’s culture and needs. This will result in long-lasting partnerships that will prove beneficial to both parties. To achieve these objectives, it is necessary to know the educational system in which the potential partner is embedded, and to have a variety of options (e.g., public and private, big and small, with a lot of or little experience, located in large or smaller urban areas). Institutions should also prioritize learning about the important characteristics of this potential partner, including its mission, vision and values, priorities, weaknesses and strengths. It is important to have a mediator or interlocutor who can fully understand both parties and thus help build bridges between them.

Meeting with academics at George  
Washington University.



**At the Department of State, participants visited with NAFSA and Partners of the Americas to learn more about the 100,000 Strong in the Americas program**



Our mission mentors pursued these objectives. Here is the process they followed:

- 1** The mission was composed of representatives from eight diverse Argentine universities, an embassy representative and a representative of the Ministry of Education and Sports in Argentina. Taking advantage of this group heterogeneity, we could share our expertise, raise questions about potential problems or obstacles, and thus suggest possible answers and solutions.
- 2** Meetings were held with key figures involved with the American educational system: the State Department, NAFSA: Association of International Educators, Partners of the Americas, university accrediting agencies, and AASCU, among others. Thanks to these meetings, we could learn about American educational policy and gather information on programs and scholarships meant to promote academic and cultural exchanges.
- 3** We also visited university campuses and community colleges located in different areas and with unique academic, cultural and social standards. Walking around a university campus is an excellent opportunity to use “internationalization at home”—which implies not only getting to know the academic program and research centers of any university, but also learning about other issues within academic life: university assistance to students in search of jobs (i.e., providing them with the appropriate clothing or any necessary advice for job interviews), college or university anniversary celebrations, the promotion of institutional visibility, activities for recreational facilities (e.g., showing a film once a week), how university campuses host foreign professors, the characteristics of university canteen and meal services, the management of the book borrowing systems, and more.
- 4** Hosting university managers through organized events that summon both professors and researchers provides the opportunity to discuss issues related to graduate and postgraduate programs, research projects, student and academic mobility requirements and needs, co-authored publications in scientific magazines, thesis co-supervision, dual degree programs, etc.

- 5** Every event allowed for each of the Argentine representatives to introduce their own educational institutions—highlighting their characteristics, interests and expectations for potential joint activities.
- 6** The embassy also hosted a series of workshops with AASCU’s support. Through these workshops, AASCU explored the main characteristics, priorities and goals of the Argentine institutions. This information helped AASCU pinpoint partners who could compliment Argentine institutions, and allowed AASCU to become a reliable interlocutor or mediator between Argentine and American educational institutions. This is the necessary foundation for complementary, long-lasting and reciprocal relationships, which are the ones that, in the long run, prove successful.

Undoubtedly, institutions should not analyze activities separately, but as an integrated agenda. Throughout our process, both institutions had the main objective of creating and strengthening both American and Argentinian institutional ties.

With AASCU’s support, we will also be hosting five American public policy experts this year through our United States Program: Public Policies for Local Development initiative, funded through the embassy’s 2017 Funding Program for Cooperation and Exchange Projects. These experts will participate in seminars and other academic activities in our university.

Once again, we will consider educational diplomacy essential in this exchange, since it will serve as a stepping stone to create or strengthen institutional relationships. Both the embassy and AASCU played essential roles, including collaborating to select the experts.

All in all, we truly applaud the activities organized by the American embassy. The Universidad Católica de Santa Fe is already bearing the fruit of such efforts. We welcome the organization of this mission in our own country as well as in many others, and we strongly encourage each and every government and embassy to emulate this initiative. **P**

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