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Internationalization and its Challenges at U.S. Regional Comprehensive Universities: The Transformational Leadership Role of Senior International Officers

Ibrahima F. Yaro
Fort Hays State University, United States

Aaron W. Hughey
Western Kentucky University, United States

ABSTRACT

This interpretive phenomenological analysis investigated the role of transformational leadership and the challenges that senior international officers (SIOs) face in internationalizing regional comprehensive universities (RCUs) in the United States. Twelve in-depth interviews were conducted with SIOs from five regions: the West, Midwest, South, Southeast, and Northwest. The findings indicate that the transformational leadership approach is the primary leadership style utilized by senior international officers for the effective and successful internationalization of their institutions. The findings highlight a wide range of challenges that a senior international officer may encounter at a regional comprehensive university in the United States. The study outlines implications for practice for aspiring SIOs and current senior leaders in the United States.

Keywords: Internationalization, regional comprehensive universities, senior international officer, transformational leadership, higher education

Senior international officers (SIOs) play an essential role in the internationalization of universities and colleges. The Association of International Education Administrators refers to SIOs as higher education staff members responsible for leading the comprehensive internationalization of their institution. As such, they are tasked with implementing comprehensive internationalization on U.S. campuses and are responsible for developing strategic partnerships with

foreign institutions and agencies. The participants in this study had similar responsibilities, as they oversaw international student recruitment as well as domestic students, faculty, and staff members studying, conducting, or presenting research findings abroad. The interviewees also mentioned that they led strategic planning initiatives on their campuses, focusing on internationalization. SIOs face numerous challenges, including insufficient funds for internationalization, a lack of interest from domestic students, and the location of their institution. Researchers have investigated the concept of internationalization in higher education in a broader sense (Altbach & Knight, 2007; de Wit, 2002; de Wit & Altbach, 2021; Knight, 1994; Knight, 2004). Although some scholars have addressed aspects of leadership in internationalization (Hudzik, 2015; Knight, 1994; Knight, 2010), little attention has been given to the leadership approaches and challenges that SIOs face at RCUs. In the U.S., a regional comprehensive university is a four-year university offering a wide variety of undergraduate programs and some master's programs. Some comprehensive universities also offer doctoral programs in applied areas (Henderson, 2009). The current study helps to fill the gap in the literature regarding the leadership approaches and challenges that SIOs face in their efforts to internationalize RCUs in the U.S. The following research questions guided this study:

1. What leadership approaches do senior international officers use in the internationalization of regional comprehensive universities?
2. What are the challenges senior international officers face in the internationalization of regional comprehensive universities?

The findings will undoubtedly enrich the literature on internationalization, specifically for RCUs.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Higher education institutions' students, faculty, and staff members are increasingly moving globally to pursue knowledge, its dissemination, and cultural exchanges. Scholars have referred to such mobility as the internationalization of higher education (de Wit, 2002). The internationalization of higher education "as a concept and strategic agenda is a relatively new but broad and varied phenomenon, driven by a dynamic combination of political, economic, sociocultural and academic rationales and stakeholders" (de Wit, 2019, p.8). The global village that the world has become has made higher education institutions adapt to meet the requirements of a global society. Universities are expected to train citizens to be competitive in a global market (de Wit & Altbach, 2021). Thus, institutions are putting in efforts to develop and provide study abroad and study away programs, as well as to recruit international students and faculty.

Researchers have extensively addressed the notion of internationalization in terms of its conceptual framework (Knight, 2004; Qiang, 2003), rationale, challenges, and strategies (Harari, 1992; Knight, 2004; Qiang, 2003), and current and future trends (de Wit & Altbach, 2021). However, few scholars have

investigated the concept of internationalization at RCUs in the U.S. with a specific focus on the leadership of SIOs and challenges that may be unique to them.

Knight (2004) defined the internationalization of higher education as "the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of postsecondary education" (p.11). It appears that internationalization is not a state; rather, it is a process that can occur through the incorporation of international topics in teaching and learning; the recruitment of international students; and opportunities for domestic students, faculty, and staff to travel abroad for educational and cultural exchange purposes. Owing to the numerous challenges facing societies worldwide, internationalization is increasingly expected to contribute to achieving the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (de Wit & Altbach, 2021). However, according to de Wit and Altbach (2021), the rise of nationalist and populist movements, bans on immigration and integration, and anti-globalism negatively impact internationalization and its different meanings. For de Wit and Altbach (2021), there are two types of internationalization: internationalization abroad and internationalization at home.

Internationalization Abroad

For de Wit and Altbach (2021), internationalization abroad consists of student mobility for three purposes: degree mobility, credit mobility, and certificate mobility; academic staff mobility, which consists of "the presence of international faculty at higher education institutions and systems around the world" (p.40); program mobility (mainly made up of international branch campuses); and online mobility (mainly through distance online education). Researchers have found that students who study abroad develop a greater sense of cultural awareness than those who do not (Haas, 2018). Students exposed to different cultures can identify similarities and differences between cultural groups. As a result, these students develop cross-cultural competency and communication skills and become more competitive in the employment market (Haas, 2018). A report by the University of California, Merced, states that 97 percent of students who studied abroad were hired within 12 months of graduation.

In contrast, only 49 percent of college graduates obtained a job in the same period. This indicates that culturally competent graduates are in high demand in the modern global economy. Although the number of American students studying abroad is low, at only 10 percent (Beelen & Jones, 2015), the number of American students studying abroad increased significantly from 2011--2019. Among the 283,332 students studying abroad during the academic year from 2011--2012, 347,099 from 2018--2019. However, the COVID-19 pandemic led to a considerable drop in U.S. students studying abroad to only 14,549 from 2020--2021, a 91 percent decline from the previous academic year (Opendoors, 2022). The post-pandemic era has seen a surge in study abroad numbers, with a 49 percent increase—280,716 students—in U.S. students who studied abroad in 2023 (Opendoors, 2024).

Internationalization at Home

Internationalization at home is defined as "the purposeful integration of international and intercultural dimensions into the formal and informal curriculum for all students within domestic learning environment" (Beelen & Jones, 2015, p.76). Indeed, only 10 percent of students in the U.S. participate in study abroad programs. Owing to this low number, internationalization at home seems to be a solution to reach more students and prepare them for global citizenship. Harari (1992) discussed several rationales for internationalizing higher education curricula to prepare students to be effective and competent citizens in an increasingly globalized world. Universities can achieve that goal by incorporating some international content into their curricula. Indeed, "without the serious commitment and implementation of an international content and ethos in undergraduate life, there is no possibility of achieving a quality curriculum which can prepare students adequately for the highly interdependent and multicultural world in which they live and have to function in the future" (Harari, 1992, p.53). Various strategies could facilitate the effective internationalization of higher education curricula.

First and foremost, institution leaders, faculty, and staff members need to understand the benefits and commit to internationalization to gain policymakers' support and funding. Second, the presence of international students and their effective use can greatly benefit domestic students as well as their host communities. Ivanova et al. (2025) suggested that university leaders should collaborate with local organizations for better integration of international students and community internationalization. A third way is to send professors abroad and allow foreign teachers to intervene on U.S. campuses (Harari, 1992). Allowing faculty to travel abroad can be a way to increase their capacity for successful internationalization of the curriculum. A common strategy used by many universities is to allocate funding to each department so that faculty members can take students in various study abroad programs.

Comprehensive Universities and Internationalization

Choi and Khamalah (2017) studied the notion of internationalization at home at an RCU. The authors interviewed some department leaders to understand their perceptions of internationalization, their roles, and the challenges they faced in their attempts to internationalize their institutions at home. Indeed, the traditional approach to internationalization, which consists of student and faculty mobility, has shown limitations. Internationalization at home became prominent because most students were left behind in traditional student exchanges. As a result, the rule for universities was that, because sending most of their students out in the world is challenging, bringing the world to them may be easier. Thus, RCUs engage in internationalization efforts for a variety of reasons. One of the reasons is that through internationalization, comprehensive universities aim to provide cross-cultural understanding to their students (Altbach & Knight, 2007). They recruit international students and develop programs and activities that

facilitate mutual understanding between domestic and international students. The facilitation of cross-cultural understanding can also occur through the internationalization of the curriculum. Additionally, generating additional revenue motivates comprehensive universities to engage in international education (Cantwell, 2015).

Furthermore, recruiting international graduate students may constitute cheap labor for comprehensive universities, as those students are sometimes hired to teach or work as research assistants (Altbach & Knight, 2007). The participants in this study consistently stated that their institutions engage in internationalization efforts primarily because they want to improve the cross-cultural competency of their students, faculty, and staff through the diversity they bring to their campuses. Additionally, the interviewees insisted that despite revenue generation not being their primary focus, they knew that internationalization efforts at regional comprehensive universities help bring in some money. In summary, RCUs engage in internationalization because it not only helps them ameliorate their competitiveness and the cross-cultural competency of their students but is also simply relevant for contemporary society (Crowther, 2000) due to globalization.

Challenges in Internationalization Efforts at Comprehensive Universities

Choi and Khamalah (2017) reported that comprehensive university leaders face many challenges. First, comprehensive universities are designed to serve local and regional needs. Thus, state governments usually do not allocate sufficient funding for internationalization. Second, some professional disciplines in comprehensive universities face specific requirements from accrediting agencies, giving them little room for internationalization. A third challenge concerns the limited staff of comprehensive universities in their international offices. Another challenge to internationalization efforts is the opposition of political leaders and some citizens of host countries who see international students as competitors in local job markets. In that sense, de Wit and Altbach (2021) suggested that the rise of nationalist and populist movements, bans on immigration and integration, and anti-globalists will negatively impact internationalization and its different meanings. President Trump's travel bans on some countries in 2017 negatively affected higher education in the U.S. since it hindered the ability of those institutions to attract international students and scholars (ACE, 2018; Laws & Ammigan, 2020). Donald Trump's recent executive orders may significantly impact international students wishing to come to the U.S., as they encouraged increased visa restrictions and vetting for F-1 and J-1 visa applicants (ACE, 2025).

Furthermore, comprehensive universities face the indifference of domestic students in regard to international topics and issues. According to Choi and Khamalah (2017), most students in such universities are "non-traditional" students with different family responsibilities. These factors make it difficult for the majority of students attending comprehensive universities to be fully engaged

in activities that international offices at U.S. regional comprehensive universities may provide.

Senior International Officers and Transformational Leadership

The Institute of International Education (2023) highlights the diverse responsibilities of SIOs, including advocacy, data management, and collaboration with senior leaders. Transformational leadership skills help them inspire stakeholders, foster internationalization, and align campus efforts with a shared vision for global engagement. Northouse (2013) defined transformational leadership as "the process whereby a person engages with others and creates a connection that raises the level of motivation and morality in both the leader and the follower" (p. 186).

The conceptual framework for this research is built upon the characteristics of an effective transformational leader, as described by Northouse (2013). A transformational leader has charisma, a skill that allows the leader to serve as a role model and gain the admiration and trust of their followers. Charisma is complemented by inspirational motivation, where the leader can motivate followers to accomplish a shared goal. Furthermore, intellectual stimulation is a key characteristic, as transformational leaders encourage their followers to think creatively and critically, challenging existing values and assumptions. Finally, individualized consideration is the characteristic that ensures that each follower receives personal attention, with the leader paying attention to their unique needs.

A charismatic SIO needs to be a strong role model for internationalization efforts. The SIO should be able to articulate the vision clearly, set high expectations from other constituents, and have the aptitude to energize them to engage in internationalization efforts. Inspirational motivation derives from the charisma of the senior international officer. SIOs have a unique position that allows them to encourage others to think creatively and challenge some of their values. Nolan (2015) referred to SIOs as catalysts for change that "provide encouragement and support to faculty and students and strategic advice to senior administrators" (p.33). This implies that SIOs should be transformational leaders who can engage with faculty members, students, staff, and senior administrators and help them perceive the importance of engaging in internationalization efforts while considering the needs of those stakeholders.

Successful internationalization requires a sincere commitment of senior administrators at the vice-presidential and presidential levels (IIE, 2023; Knight, 1994). Crowther (2000) summarized the roles of SIOs in five main points. First, they should pay attention to the external environment and communicate internally. Second, SIOs must analyze the institutional structure and identify how different constituents can participate in internationalization. Third, SIOs should be the primary promoters of internationalization efforts across their campuses. The fourth point is for SIOs to demonstrate transformational leadership skills by encouraging everyone on campus to engage in internationalization efforts. Finally, SIOs are responsible for ensuring that universities consider the international dimension of education when hiring faculty and staff.

METHOD

This study utilized an interpretive qualitative method, particularly phenomenological research, to examine the leadership approaches and challenges faced by SIOs in internationalizing RCUs. Johnson and Christensen (2019) state that phenomenological research seeks to understand individuals' lived experiences of a phenomenon, making informant interviews a suitable method. For Tracy (2020), informant interviews allow researchers to speak with experienced insiders on a specific topic to make sense of their lived experiences. Twelve SIOs were purposefully selected via snowball sampling after IRB approval (we reached saturation before the 12 interviews were conducted) on the basis of the following criteria to collect rich data: have a minimum of three years working in the area of international education and serve or have served as an SIO at an RCU in the U.S. in the last three years of their career.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted conveniently with participants via Microsoft Teams and Zoom from April to July 2023. The interviews lasted approximately sixty minutes each and were transcribed via Microsoft Teams or Microsoft 365, generating a total of 234 single-spaced pages. To ensure confidentiality, participants and their institutions were given pseudonyms. Data analysis began with the identification of preset categories. Preset categories require researchers to define themes or categories and look for those themes from the data (Renner & Taylor-Powel, 2003). In addition to identifying preset categories, the data were also analyzed to identify any emergent categories. The preset and subsequent emergent categories were combined to serve as first-level codes via MAXQDA, a qualitative data analysis software. Fifty-four first-level codes from the interview data were identified and synthesized into 11 second-level codes on the basis of specific issues related to Senior international officers' leadership approach and challenges internationalizing the institution. These second-level codes were reviewed to ensure that each coherently explained individual research questions. Finally, the codes were grouped into two broad themes that addressed each of the two research questions. For example, a first-level code was "selflessness," which led to a second-level code, "higher purpose," reflecting the sub-theme that "being an SIO means doing something bigger than yourself." These codes and the sub-theme fit under the preset theme "internationalizing the curriculum," which was intended to identify the transformational leadership skills that SIOs were using to succeed in their mission.

The first author, a scholar-practitioner in higher education internationalization, contributed insider insights into the leadership approach of SIOs. The second author, a professor with extensive experience in research, provided academic rigor. Both authors designed the research, with the first author leading the data collection, analysis, and manuscript preparation. The second author offered feedback and revision before the paper was submitted for publication.

FINDINGS

Internationalizing the Institution

Being an SIO Means Doing Something Bigger than Yourself

The participants reported that they joined the field of international education because of its transformative impact on their lives and their desire to create similar opportunities for others. Elody, an associate provost emerita in the Midwest with 38 years of experience, stated:

I think people who are in international education recognize that so many of us are driven by just a belief in the mission, a belief in doing something a lot bigger than ourselves, and that we choose this work because of our own experiences; because we know how transformational it has been in our lives and we want to help facilitate that for others.

Another 50-year veteran, Kano, said, "I'm just doing this for the good of the institution, for the good of the students." An institution that is successful in its internationalization efforts has the chance to position itself in the global higher education market. It can attract renowned scientists and talented students to facilitate its operation. Students who have had an opportunity to pursue international education are also more likely to have better opportunities in the job market. The interviewees indicated that successful internationalization demands a collective effort. It is not accomplished by an individual seeking their own gains. The work of an SIO also requires that uncomfortable conversations be encouraged on campus to stimulate the intellect of the campus community.

Encouraging Uncomfortable Discussions

One of the strategies that SIOs use in their leadership position to internationalize their campus is to facilitate difficult conversations that challenge stereotypes. People usually obtain information from media that may be biased. Hearing first-hand experiences may help overcome misconceptions. Elody shared how such uncomfortable discussions shifted the perspectives of attendees on the conflict between Palestine and Israel:

There were some moments in my career where I had a controversial program, or so it seemed to be. One hundred people in Carter Hall, and we had to have security there because we weren't sure if they were gonna be processing or whatnot. And this was when an Israeli, I'm sorry, a Jewish woman had written a book about her experiences as a Fulbright scholar in Israel, and she became very involved in the peace movement and realized what was happening with the Palestinians and the settlers and how the Palestinians sheep were being poisoned. She was doing a

cross-country tour to publicize her book, and we allowed her to come on campus to talk about it. This was when I was new at Violet University not long after, and one of our professors who came around a little bit over the years was an advisor to the Young Republicans, and he was telling everybody this was a terrorist organization this woman represented, and he got the newspapers involved. Our president said to me, of course, we're going to let this happen. This is what universities are about. And I knew she wasn't part of a terrorist organization because I had done research. So, she comes, the place is packed with both pros and cons people, and that woman did such an amazing job speaking about her experiences, showing pictures, showing the poison in the land where the sheep were being poisoned, and all of that. And at the end, you could hear a pin drop in the great hall because nobody could say anything. It was like you can't dispute this.

Elody described how it may be common to face resistance when trying to host some uncomfortable conversations that would challenge the status quo. Resistance can come from faculty members and student organizations. However, it is necessary for the SIO to be courageous and determined and to gain senior leaders as allies to organize those conversations that can change the perspectives of various stakeholders.

Learn to Build Relationships with Senior Leaders and Show Stakeholders Your Work

The success of an SIO depends on the quality of their relationships with senior leaders. Additionally, the SIO needs to build solid relationships with other campus constituents. Jeli said that "getting out there and talking to departments and deans and other campus units and getting them involved, being more collaborative" is what they do to be successful in their mission. SIOs need to be strategic and intentional when building relationships with senior leaders. Inviting senior leaders to events is one way to build constructive relationships. As Emalou mentioned,

It's really when you build relationships with people. That's when people start to be interested more and those are the people that will come to our programs, to our events. But if you don't build relationships, there's very little interest.

The participants demonstrated that it is essential to build strategic relationships with senior leaders, department heads, and faculty members to be successful in their internationalization efforts. As leaders, it is the responsibility of the SIO to identify opportunities to develop those relationships that can benefit the institution's internationalization plan. An effective comprehensive internationalization demands that the work is not centralized in an international office that does everything in a silo. In addition to building relationships across campuses, SIOs use data to engage people.

Use Data to Persuade

Using data to engage various stakeholders in internationalization efforts appeared to be a leadership technique that SIOs consistently utilize. This is particularly true when SIOs try to get senior administrators to provide resources. Lajeune, a vice president with 15 years of experience, mentioned:

I think advocating is constantly about telling the story but also using both quantitative and qualitative data to back it up. We all know that administrators or high-level positions do not have the time to read full reports.

SIOs work in academia, a field driven by data, and must use qualitative and quantitative data to persuade senior leaders to support internationalization efforts. The use of data by SIOs to engage different constituents and support internationalization was consistent across the board. Mike said:

Even if you do not care about globalization as an end, it helps us with better student outcomes, and as you know, those data are fairly irrefutable in terms of increasing students' GPA, retention, job placement, salaries upon graduation, life fulfillment, and engagement in communities, all of which are well documented.

You'll Get Some Migraines on the Job

Internationalizing the Curriculum

Several interviewees mentioned comprehensive curriculum internationalization as a major challenge. Although there may be efforts to have classes with an international dimension, other participants doubted that internationalizing the curriculum at their institution is even attainable. Emalou said:

I don't think the internationalization of the curriculum will ever happen at this university. The focus is so much on bringing students here or sending students abroad. To this campus that's what internationalization means. Sending students abroad and then bringing students here.

Internationalization is often mistakenly seen through the lens of student mobility. Although student mobility is an important component of the internationalization process, this should not be the only area where universities focus their attention. Many domestic students do not participate in study abroad programs. Internationalizing the curriculum is therefore the only way to get every single student to develop some international perspectives. The SIOs also mentioned that funding for internationalization efforts is another challenge they face.

Money Talks

Another challenge that SIOs at RCUs face is related to funding. Several participants reported that they must develop initiatives to generate money to do their jobs. As public institutions, they receive some funding from state governments. However, most RCUs rely on tuition money to operate. Cuts in budgets from governments and declines in enrollment hinder SIOs' internationalization efforts. Lajeune said:

Most of our international budget comes from the state, but that does prove challenging when there are budget cuts on the campus and within the division of academic affairs. This next year, the provost needs to cut the budget this next academic year in anticipation of lower enrolment.

The SIOs asserted that when there are cuts in budgets, their outreach efforts are drastically impacted, and they need to find other sources of income to continue providing some of their services. Elody explained how her institution used to rely on enrollment from Saudi Arabia and how it affected their operation:

The problem with the budget model was that it depends on the income from the students. So, there was no money from the university dedicated to staff salaries, teachers, the director, anything! All the money coming from the students was allocated to pay for staff and supplies, and what was left was recruitment. Therefore, as the Saudi students stopped arriving in large numbers, we had less and less and less to know that the program was a loss.

Elody is highlighting her institution's dependence on Saudi students for international programs. When Saudi Arabia's enrollment declined, alternative strategies were needed. This underscores the importance of diversifying international recruitment to ensure sustainability.

Diversifying the Campus

Bringing diversity regarding ethnicity, race, and religion constitutes another difficulty that SIOs from some rural RCUs may encounter. The mission of the SIO involves promoting cross-cultural understanding. As such, they actively recruit international students, faculty, and staff to increase diversity. Mike stated:

I think it is a welcoming community, but it's just not a diverse community and it's rural. In addition, I think faculty that are talented are like, yeah, I'd rather go to a bigger city that just has more opportunities. So, that's been a challenge. That's one area that I think that we could truly improve, but that's gonna be very difficult because state legislatures, especially around the South.

In this quote, Mike addressed the difficulty his institution encounters in its attempts to recruit and retain talented faculty and staff from diverse backgrounds. The challenge is the result of legislation in the state that does not encourage the promotion of affirmative action in higher education. This shows that even when the SIO and his institution are willing to diversify on campus, there are many significant hoops they have to jump, which is not an easy task.

Where the Hell is that School?

An RCU location may be a challenge for internationalization, as students consider prestige and geographic location when choosing universities. Emalou said:

We're just not a big name out there, although we're doing some amazing things for the students and giving them all these opportunities to be successful. It's just not a name that the students flock to like, you know, San Diego University or somewhere in New York because people recognize the location, not the quality of the institution.

Although RCUs may offer quality programs, their locations, if not popular in the U.S., make it challenging for SIOs to attract international students, faculty, and staff from diverse backgrounds. Limited brand recognition further hinders recruitment efforts. However, some participants noted that their institution's location provided unique advantages for attracting diverse types of talent.

Universities that are in blue states tend to be more open to global issues and are more supportive of internationalization. A blue state in the United States refers to a state in which Democrat is the majority. In contrast to blue states, red states are majority Republican. Lary said, "The state has been very generous. I mentioned earlier that it is a blue state. It's pro-education. It's pro higher ed, and they continue to provide resources to us."

Political Climate and Xenophobia

Several SIOs expressed concerns about the political climate and xenophobia hindering internationalization. Anti-globalist rhetoric and policies, such as the Trump administration's travel bans, reduced international student applications from affected countries by 54 per cent, making it harder to attract global talent to U.S. institutions (Van De Walker & Slate, 2019). The rhetoric of political leaders on anti-globalization can fuel xenophobia within communities. As a result, foreigners may not feel safe at some RCUs. As a consequence, the SIO will struggle to implement internationalization at their institution. King said:

I think the overall political climate and it's not just in the United States. I think it's a little bit everywhere. The rise of xenophobia, especially far-right politics, is very damaging to international education, especially in the U.S. I mean we all saw what happened in 2016. The number of

international students coming to the United States dropped. I mean, from one year to the next, the number of students from India applying to the United States dropped by 50 per cent. This anti-foreigner rhetoric coming out of Washington was very damaging.

Although anti-foreigner sentiment already exists among certain groups in the United States, when political leaders engage in hate speeches, they give permission and power to local community members to look at foreigners with disdain (Rose-Redwood & Rose-Redwood, 2017).

Sometimes Faculty and Domestic Students are Just Not Interested

Very few domestic students have the chance to participate in study abroad programs. To bridge that gap, SIOs commit to promoting internationalization at home to engage more domestic students. However, six SIOs indicated that domestic students are not enthusiastic about international affairs. Emalou addressed the lack of interest from the campus community at large and said:

I don't think there is an interest in the entire community to incorporate more international aspects to raise that awareness even for the study abroad. [...] You know, we live in the Midwest, and people are very comfortable with the environment they're in. Therefore, the interest in changing and making the mindset more international is a very small percentage. Therefore, a lot of the answers is like oh you're from somewhere, that's great! We have a farm. We don't wanna travel.

Emalou indicated that most domestic students at her institution come from rural areas and seem not to be interested in exploring what is outside their world. The students seem to be in a comfort zone in which they are not ready to leave. Beyond the domestic student population that shows little to no interest in internationalization efforts, the SIOs also indicated that some faculty members are among those who do not see the importance of engaging in such efforts. Emalou said, "It's just so hard to persuade faculty to take the lead and to just help out. [...] We have a hard time getting faculty to do recruitment, to take faculty-led study abroad programs." It is worth noting that RCUs are focused primarily on teaching. As such, faculty members may have heavy teaching responsibilities, making it difficult to commit to internationalization efforts. The job of the SIO often depends on the priorities of senior leaders. An SIO does not just decide to internationalize their institution. The role is under the supervision of senior leaders.

It Won't Work if it's Not a Priority for Senior Leaders

Senior leaders set priorities at RCUs. The SIO works under those senior leaders, and when they do not have much interest in international education, the SIO's mission may be compromised. Senior leaders may let "international" or

“global” appear in the institution’s mission statement to look good. However, they fail to provide resources in regard to doing real work. Francine shared how difficult it can be to succeed in internationalization efforts when senior leaders are not supportive. She said, “When you’re dealing with senior leadership who don’t necessarily support international education, they don’t see the reason behind it, it’s not a priority, it becomes much more difficult to move things forward.” The passion and dedication of SIOs for a comprehensive internationalization of their institution depends on senior leadership's priorities. An SIO might succeed in students, staff, and faculty interested in internationalization. However, when senior leaders do not see the point of investing in those efforts, they will be in vain.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE AND FUTURE RESEARCH

We found that SIOs focus more on serving students by helping their team members grow as professionals and competent individuals equipped with resources to thrive with people from diverse backgrounds. This attitude demonstrates the utilitarian motive of SIOs, confirming their tendency to resort to a transformational leadership approach. The utilitarian principle guiding SIOs focuses on the greater good of their institutions, stakeholders, and society (Bass & Riggio, 2006). The other four themes can be tied to the characteristics of a transformational leader. Encouraging uncomfortable discussions is a way to stimulate the intellect of individuals. This is exemplified by Elody, who was able to host what seemed to be a controversial conversation in a hostile campus environment with the Jewish woman who was invited to share her Fulbright experience in Israel. This shows that successful SIOs are not afraid to engage their campus community in topics that may appear uncomfortable. When SIOs promote and encourage uncomfortable conversations, students, faculty, and staff members may challenge other opinions or see their views challenged (Northouse, 2013). It is through the confrontation of those opposing ideas that truth may emerge.

When SIOs can build relationships with senior leaders and present appealingly the work they do, they demonstrate charisma, a characteristic of a transformational leader (Basham, 2013; Crowther, 2000; Hallinger, 2003; Kirby et al., 1992; Northouse, 2013; Paradise, & King, 1992). A charismatic leader can convince others easily and engage them in a mission they would not have wanted to engage in otherwise. Jeli and Emalou indicated how they get out there intentionally to share what they do in their office with academic departments and senior leaders to get them involved in internationalization efforts. Additionally, using data to convince is another skill that indicates the charisma of an SIO. Lajeune and Mike showed how they use appealing data to mobilize senior leaders and resources to internationalize their campuses. It appears crucial for SIOs to develop the ability to collect and present data to obtain extensive buy-in among campus stakeholders and beyond and to do their job successfully. The above-mentioned behaviors of the participants in this study align with Burns' description of a transformational leader as someone who helps their followers accomplish extraordinary things. The SIOs in this research demonstrated that through their

efforts, they inspire students, faculty and staff members, and senior leaders to broaden their worldviews by engaging in internationalization. Similarly, Bass and Riggio (2006) indicated that transformational leaders can motivate others to do things they thought were out of reach. The SIOs at RCUs indicated that through their leadership, some students who usually perceive international education as unattainable have been involved and have studied abroad, an experience that has positively impacted and transformed their lives.

Furthermore, Bass and Riggio (2006) stated that transformational leadership is about constantly inspiring others to keep the organization's goals in mind. The SIOs in this study are from RCUs whose mission statements show that they are committed to global perspectives. As such, in their efforts to comprehensively internationalize their institutions, the interviewees stated that they constantly remind faculty members of the institution's mission while providing strategies they can use to accomplish that mission. It is, however, essential to note that this study found that SIOs, if seen as followers from senior leaders' perspectives, become leaders since they demonstrate the ability to inspire those senior leaders to engage in internationalization efforts. This perception contradicts Bass's conception of transformational leadership (Wren, 1995). Indeed, Bass suggested that in transformational leadership, it is only the leaders who influence followers. For Bass, transformational leadership is not a process in which leaders and followers influence each other and change positions at times in such a way that followers become leaders and leaders become followers. The findings from this research clearly show that SIOs at RCUs can influence senior leaders to engage in internationalization.

We investigated the leadership approach and challenges that SIOs face in their implementation of internationalization at RCUs. The findings suggest that SIOs and international education practitioners should develop and familiarize themselves with some leadership skills and attributes. The results indicate that the SIOs in this study heavily use the skills of a transformational leader to execute their mission. They have charisma, they stimulate the intellect of various stakeholders, and they are persuasive.

Additionally, this research suggests that SIOs should expect to deal with a variety of challenges, both external and internal, when they accept the position. Internally, attempts to internationalize the institution's curriculum may face resistance from faculty and department chairs. Additionally, domestic students may show no interest in participating in internationalization efforts. The greatest internal difficulty in internationalization is when the SIO must deal with senior leaders who do not see its values. When senior leaders do not have internationalization as a priority, the task of the SIO becomes more complicated, as resources may not be put at their disposal to do the job. As far as external challenges are concerned, the SIO may be confronted with the scarcity of financial resources due to low enrollment rates and cuts in budgets. Furthermore, the unwelcoming political climate and xenophobia may contribute to jeopardizing the work of the SIO, as foreign students and faculty may not feel safe staying in communities that hate them. Diversity is central to successful internationalization. SIOs must advocate for a more diverse and inclusive campus. The reality,

however, is that RCUs may sometimes be located in areas where attracting and retaining talented personnel from diverse backgrounds is difficult. In that sense, the location of the institution where the SIO serves constitutes a significant factor that may complicate the job. SIOs in red states tend to have more difficulty internationalizing their institutions than those in blue states do. While SIOs may be able to address and resolve some internal challenges, their ability to deal with external challenges is limited.

Considering these findings, we suggest three practical implications for SIOs and international education practitioners. First, professional organizations such as the Association of International Education Administrators (AIEA) and NAFSA must provide annual training on transformational leadership to SIOs and international education practitioners. Furthermore, RCUs and professional organizations must engage in more advocacy, particularly in red states, for legislators to support by providing necessary resources for internationalization. For RCUs that are still reluctant to engage in internationalization efforts for various reasons, we suggest that they do so because it significantly benefits students, faculty and staff and the entire community where the university is located. Some of those benefits include students' employability, cultural awareness for all stakeholders, and better understanding among individuals from different backgrounds.

For future research, we recommend a comparative study of SIOs' leadership approaches and challenges at RCUs and research institutions. Also, we did not interview any subordinates or supervisors of the senior international officers in this study, making it difficult to ascertain what those followers and managers wanted or how they perceived the participants in this study. Researchers should interview SIOs' subordinates and supervisors to obtain a holistic view of their leadership approaches and how they are perceived by the people they work with on their campuses.

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Author bios

Ibrahima F. Yaro, Ed. D., serves as the Global Affairs Academic Partnerships Coordinator at Fort Hays State University. His research focuses on the internationalization of higher education, Black African international students, and leadership. Email: ifyaro@fhsu.edu

Aaron W. Hughey, Ed.D., is a University Distinguished Professor at Western Kentucky University. His research explores leadership, student development, and diversity in educational administration. Email: aaron.hughey@wku.edu
