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Create Connections; Address Frustrations; Exercise Compassion

Susan Wawrose
University of Dayton, swawrose1@udayton.edu

IV. Create Connections; Address Frustrations; Exercise Compassion

Susan Wawrose, Professor of Lawyering Skills, School of Law

I am on faculty at the University of Dayton Law School, and I am also a bit of a hybrid. My hybrid status informs my thoughts on how we should continue to approach our future role as a university that welcomes internationally diverse people onto its campus. I have been involved in international education in various ways for several years, both as student and teacher, both here in the U.S. and abroad. So, I have the perspective of being on both sides of the podium and participating as both as host and visitor. I am also the former director of the Law and Technology's LL.M. and M.S.L. programs—these are non-JD graduate programs, programs that traditionally have enrolled most of the Law School's international students.

As to being a hybrid, I have feet in two worlds. I have a strong interest both in the process of legal education as well as law-student and lawyer well-being. Toward this end, I earned a degree in clinical mental-health counseling from the University of Dayton, and I participate in the national discussion on wellness in the legal profession. I sit on the executive board of the Mindfulness in Law Society and am a member of the Law Student Wellness Committee of the American Bar Association's Committee on Lawyer Assistance Programs, a committee with a charge of discerning and implementing strategies for promoting well-being at law schools.

In keeping with the conference theme of storytelling, I would like begin by sharing my observations, through my hybrid lens, of some of the stories of international students at UD. When I reflect on our efforts at globalization, my thoughts go first to stories of discovery, enthusiasm, and even joy. I recall the excitement for some international students of their first arrival in the United States when everything is still fresh and new.

An anecdote: Just recently, during a stretch of bitter, bitter cold, I picked up a student who had just arrived in the U.S. to take him grocery shopping. He was jetlagged and had just arrived in Dayton, Ohio, from a much warmer place at a time when, well, Dayton was not at its best. The sky was white, and the clouds were low, so no sun could break through. It was punishingly cold. There was a layer of dirty snow on the streets. His student apartment was stark, and there were

no other students in his complex. So, he was alone. We headed to a big-box grocery store so he could stock up on household necessities.

I was a little embarrassed about our local "conditions," hoping he wasn't disappointed to be here. But no need. It quickly became clear that this student was delighted with everything he was experiencing. He had arrived with the eyes and the intention to see a new place from a fresh perspective. It reminded me how exhilarating just the acts of arriving and exploring can be.

I also have strong images of students arriving in my office with bags full of their first law books from the bookstore or reporting academic successes: being thrilled by receiving a good grade or "surviving" the classic law school experience of being "cold called" in class and getting the answer right.

I think of students who, after arriving in the US just months before and starting Level 2 or 3 at the Intensive English Program, have worked in a U.S. law office for the first time. This is a huge achievement—to go from being a beginning student in English to interning in a law office within just a couple years. I also think of those graduates who have shared their success in applying to doctoral programs in law or of securing a job upon return to their home country.

I think, too, of faculty and staff who have spoken with me about how much they have learned from the students and how much they enjoy interacting with the students, either professionally or in just talking with them after class or in the hallway. I think of those who tell me of a more personal connection, sharing that someone just stopped by with family members to introduce parents, spouse, or new babies, or to share a bit of their culture or background.

But the story of international education cannot be fully told without mentioning the frustrations felt by everyone involved. I believe one of the reasons for this conference is that we also need to talk about the many challenges of making international education work well.

For every one of the uplifting moments, there are moments of frustration and confusion. Sometimes it is the impediment of language. We know of students who, still developing their language skills, have difficulty completing work successfully or following the English-language lectures or classroom discussions they participate in every day. I recall one faculty-development program where members of our Intensive English Program simulated this experience for English-speaking faculty and staff. It was powerful to consider how difficult and perhaps even demoralizing this experience must be for some students on a day-to-day basis. And, language works both ways, so we also know that faculty sometimes struggle to evaluate student work: how

do you grade an assessment that doesn't follow conventions or is simply difficult to read because of the grammar and usage? We also know that some U.S. students express frustration with the integration of non-native speakers on campus. This may be in part because it challenges their image of their expected experience of UD, and there may be other reasons as well. Confronting cultural difference is also not easy. We heard Imbolo Mbue speak about her arrival in Chicago. She shared how much she disliked the city at first, and how much she just wanted to leave. No doubt some of our students have had similar reactions to Dayton or Ohio.

So, how do we proceed? What are the next steps? Circling back to the "hybrid" status I mentioned earlier, I believe the way ahead involves clear-eyed and ongoing attention to the well-being—at all levels—of all the stakeholders.

First, I think it's critically important that we acknowledge, create, and celebrate the points of connection and the strength that come from that. This is an all-hands-on-deck endeavor. Education extends well beyond the classroom for all of us. So, for instance, I would like to highlight work of the Law School's current LL.M. and M.S.L. director, Tan Boston, in this regard. What I have observed about the way Tan approaches the programs is that she involves J.D. and LL.M. students and faculty and staff in various aspects of the program so that its success becomes a shared goal of the larger community. Tan created a team of J.D. and LL.M. students who work together, and she involves them marketing and outreach to prospective students. She works with staff to develop social media posts to highlight the successes of her current students as well as faculty and staff who contribute to the program. She intentionally creates appropriate ways for U.S. and international students to interact around shared goals by creating "partners" in this way. She builds a community that erodes the us/them dichotomy and shines a light not only on the students but also on those who work with and support them. She creates a shared endeavor.

Second, I think it's important that we keep our eye on the points of frustration and continue to address them openly and creatively, just as we do with the frustrations that arise across campus in other areas. The frustrations tell us either that growth is taking place, which is good, or that something is not quite right. If the frustrations come from the fact that something is not quite right, the answer simply can't be that we throw our hands up in the air and say, "let's just drop this whole thing." No, instead, the right response is that we put our heads together and

figure out a better way forward as UD has done ever since I first became involved in international education and programming. I am not saying this is easy. But I do believe it is right.

Finally, I think it is critical that we proceed from a place of tolerance and compassion. Exercising tolerance often requires us to slow down. To listen a little harder or a little closer or even at all. To be, perhaps, more open-minded or to let go of long held assumptions. Compassion is needed not just for students who find themselves far from home and are trying to find their way, but also for those on our campus for whom being part of an international community is still new and not yet comfortable. I include in this, compassion not just for others but for ourselves. This self-compassion includes knowing when to ask for advice or assistance, when to say "this isn't working quite right," or when to just step back and reflect, to take a breath in order to gain some focus and clarity. Compassion includes having frank and open discussions about where we, as a university, can improve.

To the extent we can have those conversations in a non-judgmental way that allows us to evaluate where we are, how far we have come, and what the best route is for the future, I believe those are best "next steps."