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An Interview with Associate Vice Chancellor Hillary Kahn

Hilary E. Kahn is Associate Vice Chancellor for International Affairs at IUPUI and Indiana University Associate Vice President of International Affairs. She is also editor for the Framing the Global book series with IU Press and Associate Professor of Anthropology at IUPUI. She has been in the field of international education for nearly two decades and is the author of multiple articles and four books. At her core, Hilary is an ethnographer, an identity through which she views the world and that anchors her commitment to advancing global learning and chipping away at our territorialized notions of responsibility.

Q: How did you first become interested in leading the campus in advancing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)?

Kahn: I first became interested in the intersection of the UN Sustainable Development Goals and internationalization with my work internationally. I was having a number of conversations with colleagues and institutions and international education leaders and scholars from around the world, when I was the president of the Association for International Education Administrators. And everybody was talking about the UN Sustainable Development Goals and how we needed to fulfill that agenda

through the lens of international education. And I knew that very few people, very few institutions, very few people, very few communities in the United States were having such conversations. So it truly was through my international networks that I started seeing how important it was for institutions to embrace the agenda, but I also saw the unique position of international offices to take it on and to in some ways lead these efforts. Even so, while the SDGs are global in scope they are also manifest and made real in local context.

Q: Can you say more about why these international offices are unique, especially at the



universities?

Kahn: I think one of the misunderstandings of the SDGs is that they are international and only international and that they only impact things that are outside our borders. Nothing could be farther from the truth. I also actually think that the same thing can be said for internationalization and international learning. That there is this misunderstanding that what we do is only meaningful beyond our borders and that all we're doing is either informing students about the world beyond the United States or only bringing in individual scholars beyond our borders, and that we are not doing anything for our local community. And again, strongly, nothing could be farther from the truth. Global learning and the SDGs are so relevant to what we are doing in Indiana, in Central Indiana, in Marion County and we have to act on this responsibility. IUPUI has a deep heartfelt commitment to community engagement.

That's why we're here. And nonetheless the definition of community is too often geographically territorialized and territorialized in ways that are very local. And we very rarely step out of those geographic boundaries when we are thinking about how to engage others and how to make the world a better place. What it comes down to is our sense of responsibility. Our sense of responsibility is too bounded.

It's an aspect of global learning that I've tried to implement in professional development settings or in teaching and curricular settings. Global learning is not just about knowledge. It's not just about attitudes, and affect. It's about a sense of ethics. It's about a sense of responsibility, a sense of caring. And, and we tend to align our sense of commitment at very localized settings where we feel most comfortable and that's where we care the most. But the truth is it's also tied to our identities. We have localized identities, and our cultural

identities are often extremely rooted, in our particular cultural, historical, geographic locations. And we don't often expand ourselves beyond these concentric ways of thinking about our identities. We don't identify with our broader connections. Then the same thing goes for our sense of responsibility. Because our sense of responsibility and sense of commitment is very much layered on top of how we define ourselves. But if you started to define yourself and reflect on yourself and see yourself global and complicated and multilayered and transnational, which is what we really are. That everything we do is actually somehow impacted or informed by global phenomenon, processes and powers and people. If you can do that, then you can start to dissect yourself and your identity, then you can start to care about the world too. But the first step actually starts with yourself. Just like all learning starts with yourself.

Q: But what does that mean when we are messaging to our local communities so that they do move beyond that sense of space, bounded space?

Kahn: I think there is such a misunderstanding about how international Indiana already is. Do you know that nearly one in ten households speak a language other than English at home! And there are around 275 languages spoken in the state of Indiana. Can you believe that?

Q: Yes, this is what we are finding out from the Immigrant Welcoming Center too.

Kahn: Incredible. And so it is really an educational campaign that we need to be doing and starting with the fact that our definition of Indiana needs to be dismantled [It needs to be] diversified, and be much more complicated than it is. The definition of a Hoosier needs to be revised. Internationalized. Because it is inherently about difference. Even think about things that are the epitome of Indiana. Motorsports. We can't build our cars without international commodity chains.

And we can't think about just the sport itself. It's intensely global. Think about limestone quarries, and where all that limestone ends up in buildings all over the world. Think about where all our corn, ducks, soy beans, and engines land around the world. Think about all the people and companies we have here in Indiana. Think about everything. It's all about the way it's being framed. And, we are framing ourselves as this land locked, isolated state, when all you have to do is live here for a little while and realize that that's the farthest from the truth.

Q: When you said it is the way it is framed, can we link that to the educational work that you referenced a moment ago? What would that mean in terms of our relationship with educators.

Kahn: I always think part of global learning and any powerful critical learning process starts with rethinking whatever categories you're supposed to be starting with. And in this case it's about starting with the diversification of our definition of the state of Indiana. And as you say, 'educate,' what does that mean about the educational mission? I don't know whether this is where you're going or not, but we need to redefine the term 'educator.' I always like the fact that we've gone away from calling ourselves 'professor' or that we often call ourselves educator. But we need to be learners too, right? We try to focus on processes of learning and educating and not necessarily identifying or aligning them with a particular person. So we're almost at a point where we need de-territorialize that; to decouple the process of learning and teaching away from these preordained categories or appointed positions and so on. We need to make it more about the process. That's actually one thing I recognize. We're proud of our learner-centric learning, right? But it should really be learning. It is about learning. It's about the process and what comes out of it.

Q: You are making such an incredible important point about the process. Say some more about your vision for furthering the UN sustainable

development goals. Where do you see it going for your vision?

Kahn: It's interesting. I think I entered into the work with the Sustainable Development Goals very focused on international education. And, and as you said, it's a cornerstone for our efforts for internationalization at IUPUI. I'm delighted that we're able to move on that. But I really do see it as more than international education. And I want to make sure that we are able to decouple the SDGs from our global identity. Because this is about what we do locally as well too. And this is what we do generally with the communities that we engage with. We can move this agenda forward when we're working together; when we're working collectively, when we're working as partners. One of the SDGs is about partnership. It's one of the most critical ones. Number 17, it's the last one, but it's really the first one. It's where it all starts. And we need to be doing that with people and communities all over the world and in ways that are very reciprocal and transformational, and not necessarily about what we're getting out of it, but it's about what we're doing together.

Q: I know that notion of 'together.' People often say that. But how do we foster equitable partnerships? I think that is a major challenge if your vision is to really have these reciprocal relationships; this transformation of what we have been doing. How do we really foster this as a part of your vision and furthering the work?

Kahn: I think it's an area where we can contribute. It is in our office's DNA, thanks to the work of people like Susan Buck Sutton. But I do think we must work hand-in-hand with offices of community engagement. We should probably need to have more really good conversations. And now that I'm talking to you, we should do an event, specifically about that—community, reciprocal,

transformational bi-directional partnerships. What does that really mean? How do you develop these? Because it's one thing to say you do it and it's another thing to actually do it. Too often we end up falling back on those darn categories, you've got those darn binaries that you need to undo. And I think in many ways that's what's lovely about the sustainable development goals- is that it's not about binaries out the system. It's about how this is all connected and holistic, and integrated, iterative, integrated and interdependent.

Q: You mention the interdisciplinary and the iterative. Those are two words and 'engage' we will probably ask you to elaborate for just our everyday readers. Because it is a journal for supporting faculty and staff and students, but it is also for our community. And so when you talk about interdisciplinary work and iterative work, those are not necessarily words some of our folks out in the community would use. Can you say a little bit more about what the two words mean?

Kahn: Well, it's not linear. Right? It's not about even having even a preordained sense of where you're going. It's about letting the collective knowledge production be the direction. It's about allowing the empirical to speak. Don't ask me to define that one either.

Q: But I am tracking with you. That is our tag line for ENGAGE! co-created knowledge, serving.

Kahn: It's about serving, but it's allowing the process to direct you. And so many people are uncomfortable with that lack of direction. Unless are goals are truly collectively articulated, then there will always be the power differential. You see quite a bit on that international level when we're talking about international partnerships and locally too. You have a big power house like Indiana

University and IUPUI, working with communities. It's tough to truly focus on the collective and to do things together, and even when you try and even when you have the best intentions, it's still very difficult. So you must constantly be checking yourself, constantly going back and re-learning and rethinking and reeducating and making mistakes and recognizing that this is a process, an iterative process that will never be fully completed. The sustainable development goals, there is not an end point, even though we have a lot of metrics and so on. It's a process. And it will constantly be a process, making the world a better place. It always can be better. There's always room for advancement. There's not a best. There will never be a best place. Even the term 'best practices,' there's no such thing as a 'best practice.' There's a lot of promising practices that we should adhere to. But there's always room for improvement. And the interdisciplinary nature is just so key. We can't do this by ourselves. We can't pick your profession, your discipline. We have to do this collectively too. And I think global learning and community engagement recognizes that. The sustainable development goals clearly recognize that. This must be done with as many different perspectives, with as many different ideas with as many different theories and methods and forms of practice and different ways of doing things, and different ways of interpreting things. That's how you learn, right? And we've learned that too. That's where you are creative. That's where you're nimble. That's where you're the most skilled. That's where you're better is when you're working together.

Q: Better together. You talked about being nimble, it made me think about how many times within our disciplines we are not necessarily nimble. Sometimes we are very confined.

Kahn: The other day we were talking about our

cultural lenses through which we see the world but disciplinary lenses, oh my goodness! I mean, that's another great example of how we're enculturated into a thought process that we're not even aware of it. It's so tacit- it's why it can be so difficult to teach disciplinary thinking.

Q: Sometimes it is about the teaching-- not necessarily supporting the learning. . . . This disciplinary lens is enculturated just like you said. Yes, it is all these, there are all these theories. The theories.

Kahn: I think there's a misunderstanding that interdisciplinary work is somehow a threat to the disciplines. But I think it actually makes you a better disciplinary thinker. It makes you stronger. If you're able to strengthen that positionality through diversity. It isn't just about gender equity, but about poverty, about cleaner cities, about education,. . . It is about Social Work, Anthropology, and Public Health.

Q: Is it about intersectionality?

Kahn: Yes, it's about intersectionality. And that's the only part about the SDGs that kind of irks me sometimes. It's those darn boxes. They're beautiful, but they're not meant to stay in boxes, right? They should come up with something else- puzzle pieces perhaps.

Q: There is another diagram that I wanted to put next to this interview column. And I looked at the ones with the boxes. I liked how they had a little definition with each one. But the boxes. . .

Kahn: That's not the point. And that's why I always have a hard time, like what could we do to scale this up? Should we have a theme for the campus? Should we choose a goal and then we can all focus on that. I'm not against that. But again, I just don't think that this is about choosing



a particular global issue. It's might be about focusing on one, but then always recognizing the interconnections between them. Which is why it's such a powerful curricular piece too. And such a powerful research device as well. Actually, the grant that we are collaborating with OVCR [the Office of the Vice Chancellor for Research] on is requiring the proposals to cover at least two of the goals. So again, that interdependence, whether it's between goals; between local and global, whether it's between partners-- that's so critical to what we do.

It is also critical for us to translate our work at IUPUI, all of the work, from research, to service, to teaching, into the lexicon of the SDGs. Because what we found out a year and a half ago when we were starting this work in early 2020, was that nobody really knew what the SDGs were-- maybe about half of them. But then when you started to outline all the 17 different SDGs: about gender equality and healthy lives and ending hunger and ending poverty and so on. Then they were all like, 'Oh, well, of course I do that.' And then it ratcheted up to something like 90 percent were contributing to the SDGs in one way or another, but they just weren't doing it in the lexicon of the SDGs. And so Ian McIntosh, in our office, is actually working in this area and translating what we do at IUPUI into the vocabulary of the SDGs. And so we're going to keep working on that.

We are currently doing this school-by-school but we do need to do it more systematically. We need to start developing a more formal inventory. Institutions of higher education are doing that. I just received something from UC Davis. It was so beautiful. They are really doing such great work and have great support. And I think we have that at IUPUI as well. We've got great support, but we need to ratchet this up a bit. We need an "All In" approach.

Having an All In approach includes connecting more with business. The business communities in Central Indiana and beyond, care about this work, and they need research to support it. I think there's many, many more businesses that are committed to this work than people would ever know. Some of the biggest advocates for this work are coming out of our business community. And that includes businesses and CEOs in Central Indiana. There's the UN Global Compact. That is where businesses and institutions sign on to a sustainability agenda. And two of the biggest, Cummins and Lilly, are signed onto it. They represent an important cornerstone of scaling up this work.

Q: Are US foreign policies impacting other nations around the world as to global health and wellness?

Kahn: Let me just say this--that nothing that we do in the United States or, I think anywhere, is done in isolation. And everything that is done, from policies to our practices, to our preferences, to our various different commodities, we do not do it in isolation, there is always a ripple effect. And it ripples in ways that I think we can't even ascertain. We have no idea. That's why I think one of the problems, just generally a foreign policy, not just US foreign policy, but all policies, all everything-- is that it's so hard to really understand the ripple effect. And we all can think of so many different examples of when we've created a new policy or a new approach or a new law thinking that we are going to be stamping out this, or helping in this area when in fact, we are completely blind to what it's doing and other areas. And I guess this comes down to need to be thinking holistically, systemically, about the interdependence of it all. And that's a skill set though that we don't learn. We are taught to think as individuals. We're taught to think in isolation. We're taught to think about categories. We learn to think within disciplines. We're taught to think about the present, and not

necessarily the future either. So the more that we can be thinking-- across our boundaries, across our borders, across all our different policies and practices and the different phenomenon that we encounter on a regular basis, then the more apt and the more able we might be able to think about that impact of our policies. So that's how I'd be answering that question. It's hard though. How are we supposed to know? I think about if we can at least know-- see those connections, then we'll start to understand that we need to be thinking about the longer-term impact. It goes back down to the sense of responsibility, right? If we're only thinking about ourselves; and if we're only thinking about our own geographic territories, or if we're only thinking about one problem and one issue, then our ability to think more broadly- to have a responsibility that transcends oneself and one's localized sense of who they are is severely limited. We need to be having a broader sense of self, a global sense - a global sense of the United States, a global sense of Indiana. And that's how we make change. Ultimately that's how we make the world a better place.

The business communities in Central Indiana and beyond care about this work, and they need research to support it. I think there's many, many more businesses that are committed to this work than people would ever know.

Q: And that's how we ultimately make the world a better place. And it's never the best place.

Kahn: No! And what fun would that be anyway?