

Perhaps, like me, you wake up every day thinking how you can best meet the needs of your international students and make them feel welcome on campus. Perhaps, like me, you spend a lot of time explaining to your colleagues about the laborious application and vetting process international students go through in order to study at an American university. And perhaps, like me, you share data with family, friends, and community members about the economic impact, not to mention the cultural benefits, international students bring to our communities.

Advocating for international students and language learners has been an informal, yet critical component of the work I have been doing throughout my career. However, this past spring, I decided I needed to formalize that aspect of my work. I wanted to learn from the best - NAFSA's Advocacy Day team - about how to transform my passion into action. I wanted to take my students' stories to my elected officials' doors, so they know what I know - when international and domestic students interact with one another - in classes, in the dorms, in the cafeteria, through sports, and through the arts, they learn and grow from one another. They need to know that as a result of these shared experiences, students often examine their own beliefs and open their minds to different ideas, beliefs, and lifestyles.

I was the fortunate recipient of WAIE's 2018 NAFSA Advocacy Grant, which allowed me to participate in a day-long training in D.C. and a day of meetings with elected officials on Capitol Hill along with international educators from all across the US. While the training and experience in D.C. was invaluable, so was creating new relationships with other international educators passionate about advocacy work. It was especially rewarding to work with the Wisconsin delegation, which consisted of Rachel Haos (Alverno College), Michael Lee (UW Stout), Caity Dawson (UW Madison), Katie Klein (UW Milwaukee), Danielle Clarizio (UW Marinette), Miranda Panzer (UW La Crosse) and myself. We collaborated and strategized in DC and shared our newfound skills, resources, and ideas at the WAIE State Conference in Neenah. We continue to reach out to one another on advocacy issues and other professional matters.

It is always the right time to do the right thing, and now is the right time to advocate for international students.

Bio:

Rhonda Petree is currently a U.S. Fulbright Scholar at Narva College at the University of Tartu in Estonia. Formally the Director of the English Language Transition Program at the University of Wisconsin-River Falls, she has worked with adult learners at the Hubbs Center in St. Paul, MN and with middle school students in Verona, WI. She began her career while serving as a U.S. Peace Corps volunteer in Kazakhstan. She has degrees from the University of Minnesota and the University of Wisconsin.

