



UAF news and information

Friday Focus: Be an ally

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Provost Anupma Prakash, center, poses with Japanese students who visited Fairbanks in 2019 to attend a Summer Sessions program to learn English. Photo courtesy of Anupma Prakash.

— Anupma Prakash, provost and executive vice chancellor

The events of the past few weeks have once again exposed the vulnerability of the international students and workforce in the U.S. higher academia. It started with [President Trump's proclamation](#) suspending entry of foreign employees in the U.S. this year. For us, this meant that distinguished international researchers who were awaiting their visas to start work at UAF, were now left stranded.

Another recent [guidance](#) prohibited international students from being in the U.S. if none of their classes was taught face-to-face. This ill-conceived and extremely unfriendly regulation evoked widespread shock, anger, protests and was quickly rescinded in response to legal action and fierce opposition by higher academia, bringing a sigh of relief. Nevertheless, the policy changes sent a wrong signal to a large international community.

These events struck a personal chord with me. I left my home country in 1996 to pursue higher education and a professional career in Europe. Moving far away to an unknown land was daunting. I felt the pressure of straddling

different cultures. There was a desire and need to adapt and blend, to mingle and be accepted. And then there was the recognition that I was being judged with a different standard. I felt that I needed to work harder to demonstrate my worth. Fighting the daily battles of inherent bias and stereotyping took a lot of energy and courage.

In 2002 I moved to Alaska. The first month of my job at UAF my luggage had not arrived. I ran out of clean Western attire, and so I wore my traditional Indian dress to work. Someone asked me if it was a religious or festive day. I smiled and said no, that's just me — on a regular day. I would not have been able to give that seemingly simple response in 1996.

My stories may be different from those of other international students and workers. They have their unique journeys and different stories of struggle, adaptation and resilience. We each bring our diverse perspective. It is important to build an environment where these stories can be shared without fear. And it is time to deepen the conversation about the impacts of policies on international students and employees. Unwelcoming policies only add to the fears and anxieties of an already vulnerable international community.

There are many things we can do to signal to students that we are supportive. We can reach out to an international student we know to check on their well-being. We can mentor, counsel and guide them to navigate the university processes and be successful in their personal and professional life. We can explain in our course syllabi how we will accommodate the needs of international students who may be stranded in their home country in a very different time zone and challenging home environment. We can increase our familiarity with campus support resources that we can refer the student to. An act of kindness, planned or random, will go a long way to show that we care, and that we are their ally. And in doing so, we can together contribute to strengthening our campus culture of diversity, inclusivity, respect and care.

Friday Focus is a column written by a different member of UAF's leadership team every week. On occasion, a guest writer is asked to