

William Plater is a popular figure at events like the IUPUI International Festival. Yannan Li has completed her master's in applied communication and is working on her doctorate in philanthropic studies.



William Plater:

How Internationalists Are Made

When William Plater came to Indianapolis in 1983, he knew exactly what needed to happen. An institution in only its second decade of existence, developed independently by two separate universities on campuses in different parts of the city with its main campus pushed on one side by the offices of the state government and on the other side by some of the state's most important medical facilities—Indiana University–Purdue University Indianapolis needed to fulfill its potential as a world-class urban university. How that would be accomplished defined Plater's professional journey of now almost 30 years.

"The '80s was a period of enormous ferment and change," Plater said. "I was attracted by the opportunity to work at a campus on the brink of growth and self-definition; with a clean slate, we could think about the university in different ways. With the resources of the city all around us, we had the chance to define a role built out of the interaction between campus and community through service to the community, from units across the curriculum and through the strategic use of the expertise of our professional schools."

Beyond the local dimensions that consolidated the institution onto one campus and that solidified ties



During his first international visit to IU projects abroad in 1987, William Plater (second from right) participated in the 20th anniversary of the National Institute of Development Administration (NIDA) in Bangkok. He stands here with NIDA officials and his IUPUI mentor, Howard Schaller. IU's partnership with NIDA (and its predecessors) is one of the university's oldest, ranging back more than half a century. NIDA awarded Plater an honorary doctorate of philosophy in development administration in 2010.

between campus and community, IUPUI had to define a global role to serve both its faculty and its students. "The world won't stand still," Plater said. "The Indiana economy depends on global activity and will come to depend on its international trade more and more. Our faculty had to facilitate this, and our students needed to be prepared for workplaces at home and abroad that were requiring ever greater familiarity with international issues."

Plater was not born an internationalist. "I didn't even have a passport until I was 30." In 1987, Dean of Faculties Howard Schaller groomed Plater to succeed

him. Schaller warned that a generation of faculty who had been active abroad was retiring, and Plater would have to ensure that its achievements did not get lost. "He took me along on a visit to IU projects in Hong Kong, Thailand, and Malaysia. From then on, the international piece of IUPUI's future preoccupied me personally."

With Plater's encouragement, the campus's international capacity rose from what could be achieved through an office with funding of \$500 a year in the 1980s to the multi-department, multi-service unit that exists today. He outlined the international strategy that

the campus developed to make the best use of this office and other campus resources. "Our international affairs couldn't be like IU Bloomington, with its many offerings in languages and area studies. We needed to build from our strengths in professional education, medicine, and law, for example. Partnerships with Moi University in Kenya and Sun Yat-sen University in China, each of which now involves multiple IUPUI units, were the early fruits of these efforts.

When Plater left the position of executive vice chancellor and dean of the faculties in 2006, *emeritus* began to appear in

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some of his titles, but he can hardly be said to have retired. He founded the International Community Development Workshop, a cooperative effort of the Indiana Policy Institute, the IUPUI Office of International Affairs, and IUPUI’s Center on Philanthropy. The object of the workshop was to forge linkages that would provide a conduit for IUPUI expertise to assist in strengthening Indianapolis’s future as an international city. “We looked to create a common ground for government, nonprofits, corporations, and, of course, the university. One project, for example, was a study of the regions of the campuses with which we had partnerships to determine opportunities for economic and social investments that reflected the strengths and needs of Indiana and the target area abroad.”

After more than five years, Plater has passed the management of the workshop on to others, but only to move on to projects in accreditation and interactive scholarship. As countries—China, India, and Korea, for example—seek university training for larger and larger portions of their population, universities on both sides of the Pacific have

sought ways of cooperative education on a welter of models. “While accrediting bodies of both institutions and of specialized disciplines have awakened to the need to consider higher education globally,” Plater said, “the policies and guidelines are not yet comprehensive, systematic, or well coordinated.” Of particular concern is the growing number of joint and dual degrees; students do work at universities in their home country and in the United States and can earn a single degree that names both universities (not very common), or they might earn separate degrees from each institution based on the same work.

As senior advisor to the Western Association of Schools and Colleges, the chief accrediting agency for California and Hawaii and points west, Plater is working to rationalize the pursuit of international academic cooperation in East Asia and build a basis for confidence and trust. “We are attempting to determine a process that will allow us to accredit a limited number of universities in other countries. Such a process needs to ensure that standards match what the association applies in the United States but at the same time to respect valuable national differences in the delivery of

higher education. The association has created a new policy on joint and dual degrees, which will have a significant impact on how member institutions interact with counterparts around the world.”

Plater’s most recent venture is as senior advisor on educational strategies and international affairs to a new learning technology company, Course Networking. The company has just rolled out open-source software that will allow instant and on-the-fly scholarly collaboration and course projects between institutions across town or at distant ends of the earth. The code is being written in Guangzhou, China.

One indicator of the length and breadth of Plater’s service to IUPUI is the size of his email mailbox. “I’m told I have one of the biggest email boxes in the system, but in there are documents and plans to which we need ready access to sustain IUPUI’s contacts with universities from Cairo to Zhejiang, Lima to Vancouver, Eldoret to Melbourne. They inform our work right now, and I can’t imagine the loss if they were to be packed away somewhere where we can no longer use them.”

