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Intercultural Leadership and Institutional Readiness: Perspectives from Administrators Driving Global Engagement Initiatives in Midwestern Universities

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Abstract: This literature review synthesizes research on the correlation between intercultural leadership and institutional readiness in enhancing global engagement, with a particular focus on Midwestern colleges in the United States. Drawing on twenty-six scholarly and professional sources, it investigates how leadership vision, organizational structures, pedagogy, and campus culture influence the depth and sustainability of internationalization. The assessment highlights intercultural leadership as the primary driver for preparation, the alignment of institutional priorities, resource allocation, and inclusive behaviors. Structural preparation, as demonstrated by solid finance, governance structures, and professional development, helps to put this leadership vision into action. Pedagogical innovations, such as Internationalization at Home and Virtual Exchange, show how intercultural learning can be scaled without relying heavily on student mobility. The literature also highlights the Midwest's unique situation, where budgetary constraints and local missions necessitate adaptable tactics for global engagement. Despite significant conceptual progress, empirical research is still scarce, particularly in longitudinal and region-specific analyses that link leadership behavior to observable institutional effects. The assessment concluded that preparedness is both a consequence and a capacity, indicating how well institutions combine leadership, policy, pedagogy, and culture into cohesive systems that promote equitable global learning.

Keywords: Intercultural leadership, institutional readiness, internationalization, global engagement, higher education.

INTRODUCTION

Higher education institutions across the United States face complex demands to internationalize while remaining relevant to local and regional populations. Internationalization has progressed from voluntary collaboration to a defining feature of institutional character. The issue for Midwestern colleges is exacerbated by geography, limited state support, and public missions that prioritize regional service. Given these realities, multicultural leadership and institutional preparation are vital for attaining effective global participation. Intercultural leadership refers to the intentional, multi-level capacity to guide a university's global engagement agenda while fostering inclusive and culturally responsive practices across governance, curriculum, and student services. It combines vision, political skill, and cultural intelligence to align people and policies toward common goals (Altbach & Knight, 2007; De Wit & Deca, 2020; Lundula, 2024; Smithee, 2012). Institutional readiness, in turn, describes the extent to which a university possesses the alignment, resources, and systems necessary to enact that vision. It includes strategic commitment from leadership, organizational structures that sustain global initiatives, mechanisms for integrating intercultural learning, and policies that translate aspiration into everyday practice (Ahwireng, 2016; Ward, 2017; Soler, Kim, & Cecil, 2022).

Scholars like Altbach and Knight (2007) and De Wit and Deca (2020) see internationalization as a deliberate response to globalization rather than a passive adaptation. Their distinction emphasizes that readiness is more than just technical capacity; it is also a moral and strategic willingness to act. Smithee (2012) adds historical context by examining how leadership for internationalization has evolved from centralized command to diffused advocacy. This shift increases the responsibilities of presidents, provosts, and mid-level administrators to reconcile competing interests, align incentives, and maintain continuity during leadership transitions. External expectations and internal limits exacerbate these issues for Midwestern universities. According to Jons (2012) and Findlay (2020), regional institutions frequently have to balance global objectives with mandates to serve local populations. Financial constraints and enrollment fluctuation have resulted in a cautious approach to global participation, stressing gradual progress over comprehensive reform. However, the same circumstances provide chances for innovation. Ahwireng (2016) and Barnes and Gearin (2021) show how adaptable, coalition-based leadership can use limited resources to

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integrate global viewpoints into institutional missions.

This literature study brings together twenty-six scientific and professional sources on intercultural leadership and institutional readiness. It examines how leadership, organizational structure, pedagogy, and regional environment interact to shape internationalization at Midwestern universities. The review has three objectives. First, it establishes the theoretical and empirical basis for intercultural leadership and preparation. Second, it looks at how administrators and academics put policy into action through resource mobilization, curriculum reform, and extracurricular activity. Third, it identifies current gaps in the literature to develop a research agenda for future study.

The review is divided into eight principal areas. The first examines leadership as the major driver of institutional readiness. The second looks at structural readiness and resource mobilization. The third section discusses intercultural competency as an institutional result. The fourth analyzes curriculum and pedagogy as the foundation for preparation. The fifth and sixth sections cover faculty and staff engagement, student services, and campus climate. The seventh section places these processes within the Midwestern regional framework. The eighth combines theoretical theories and methodological methodologies to describe preparedness processes. The evaluation finishes with a summary of the patterns, remaining gaps, and implications for future research.

LEADERSHIP AS THE PRIMARY CATALYST FOR INSTITUTIONAL READINESS

Leadership is regularly cited in the literature as the driving reason behind effective internationalization. It decides whether institutional commitments to global participation are sustained or merely symbolic. The data from empirical and conceptual studies indicates that presidents, provosts, chief international officers, and deans provide the vision, structure, and advocacy required to connect campus systems with global concerns. Sullivan (2011) investigated the role of senior executives in incorporating internationalization into the mission of American colleges. She discovered that evident, consistent presidential commitment was substantially associated with implementation depth. Institutions whose leaders publicly linked global involvement to teaching and research quality saw increased faculty participation and broader curricular integration. Campuses where leadership engagement was confined to rhetorical support struggled to coordinate activities and maintain momentum.

Ahwireng (2016) found that the most accurate indicator of readiness was strong, centralized leadership backed by well-defined institutional goals after comparing two colleges with disparate results. While the less successful institution relied on ad hoc efforts that vanished when leadership changed, the successful school's president outlined a shared vision and provided dedicated funds. According to Ahwireng, cultural reinforcement, resource commitment, and leadership strategy must all be in harmony for preparedness. Jons (2012), who studied Midwestern colleges striking a balance between local identity and global aspirations, echoes the idea of leadership visibility. She discovered that executives engaged in negotiations with local stakeholders, faculty unions, and governmental systems in addition to acting as managers.

Leadership in this context meant forming alliances and retaining legitimacy among groups who may be skeptical about globalization. Jons found that intercultural leadership entails converting global objectives into regional relevance, a skill that is frequently disregarded in national policy frameworks.

Barnes and Gearin (2021) switched the emphasis to distributed leadership, discovering that internationalization thrives when authority is shared by mid-level administrators and faculty champions rather than centered in a single office. Their findings revealed that dispersed models improve sustainability because they can withstand leadership transition and encourage collaborative ownership. This notion builds on the work of Kuffuor *et al*. (2024), who used Kotter's change management paradigm to study internationalization efforts. They proved that leaders at all levels improve readiness by achieving short-term goals, celebrating achievement, and institutionalizing successful practices.

Through a mapping project run by the American Council on Education, Soler, Kim, and Cecil (2022) offered quantitative validation. According to their analysis, universities that have well-defined leadership structures for international engagement, dedicated offices, official reporting lines, and internationalization-focused strategic

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plans achieve greater readiness on various metrics, including student participation, faculty involvement, and partnership development. Additionally, their research showed geographical differences: due to financial constraints and conflicting goals, Midwestern universities were less likely than their coastal counterparts to incorporate internationalization into university-wide planning. Several leadership patterns appear repeatedly in this research. Effective leadership requires both vision and practical planning. They use evidence to support ongoing investment, incorporate internationalization into core processes, and communicate consistently. Cultural empathy and adaptability are also necessary for intercultural leadership. According to Lundula (2024), these attributes are a component of the behavioral, emotional, and cognitive competencies of successful global leaders. In addition to comprehending cultural systems, leaders must provide an example of transparency, introspection, and tolerance for diversity in day-to-day operations. However, research cautions against relying too much on charismatic leadership. In the words of Smithee (2012) and De Wit and Deca (2020), internationalization can only be sustained if it is ingrained in culture and policy. In addition to bringing about change, leadership should create systems that are resilient enough to outlast individual managers. Practically speaking, this entails not viewing internationalization as a temporary endeavor but rather integrating it into strategic goals, faculty evaluations, and accrediting processes. In simple terms, leadership is both the catalyst and the framework for preparation. The most successful schools are managed by administrators who see global involvement as an essential component of academic quality, rather than an external mandate. Leadership establishes the tone for collaboration, lends credibility to intercultural goals, and offers the governance processes that transform vision into policy.

The following part investigates the institutional side of this relationship, namely how institutions, resources, and operational frameworks support the leadership vision and enable readiness.

STRUCTURAL READINESS AND RESOURCE MOBILIZATION

Structure supports the vision provided by leadership. The literature consistently reveals that institutional readiness is determined by whether a university has the resources, infrastructure, and staffing capacity to put strategic goals into practice. Without these supports, even the most visionary leaders are unable to go beyond ceremonial commitment.

Soler, Kim, and Cecil (2022) discovered that structural readiness is best demonstrated by the establishment of official global engagement offices, dedicated staff, and clear reporting lines to senior administration. Their survey of over 200 American institutions found that universities with centralized global affairs offices made more consistent progress in integrating internationalization across departments. Centralization, however, is different from control.

Institutions that combined centralized coordination with decentralized implementation, allowing colleges and units to design global goals, reported better faculty and staff engagement.

Funding is the second most important aspect of readiness. Findlay (2020) demonstrated that Midwestern universities frequently voice staunch support for internationalization but lack the necessary finances to put it into action. Her survey of student affairs administrators revealed that, while intercultural training and worldwide programs were highly valued, funding for these projects was often short-term or grant-based. The lack of reliable financing impedes continuity and hinders long-term planning.

Ahwireng (2016) reinforced this argument with a comparative case study that demonstrated a direct correlation between institutional preparation and resource predictability. In one university, the establishment of a permanent internationalization fund allowed departments to propose initiatives knowing that successful projects would be continued. Institutions that rely on annual reallocations, on the other hand, struggled to keep programs running when initial enthusiasm faded. Ahwireng stated that readiness is determined by financial continuity and accountability rather than total budget size.

Human capital is also part of the resource mobilization process. Choi, Lee, and Trent (2021) discovered that intercultural competence training for teachers and staff is a significant predictor of successful implementation.

Institutions that engaged in professional development, such as workshops, fellowships, and international teaching exchanges, saw higher rates of curricular internationalization and improved student outcomes. Their research also indicated

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that decentralized institutions often failed to provide such training, forcing individual faculty members to pursue global participation on their own. This fragmentation undermines institutional cohesion and lowers overall readiness.

Technology has emerged as another structural aspect. Hawks (2021) illustrated how investing in digital infrastructure promotes global collaboration and inclusivity, particularly through virtual exchange programs. Technology-enabled engagement enables colleges with limited travel resources to sustain intercultural learning through online courses and cross-institutional collaboration. In the Midwest, where travel expenses and visa hurdles might limit mobility, such investments are both cost-effective and capacity-building.

Organizational design can also impact readiness. Barnes and Gearin (2021) contended that distributed leadership models, in which authority and responsibility for internationalization are shared among departments, foster resilience. When international offices operate alone, they risk being viewed as peripheral; when integrated across academic and administrative divisions, global participation becomes part of the institution's fundamental mission.

However, structural preparation does not ensure inclusion or impact. Hassan (2025) cautioned that institutional frameworks can unintentionally repeat dominant cultural norms if they are not explicitly constructed to value various viewpoints. Her examination of organizational culture revealed that policies supporting global involvement often favor Western frameworks while marginalizing other cultural perspectives. This insight is essential for Midwestern colleges looking to expand their global alliances and draw in students from non-traditional regions.

When combined, these studies show that organizational readiness is created via consistent investment, well-thought-out governance, and an inclusive culture. The most advanced institutions are those that strike a balance between local initiative and central coordination, secure finance, and adaptability. This balance becomes both a difficulty and an opportunity for administrators in the Midwest, where demographic and financial realities limit quick change.

The following section shifts the focus from infrastructure to results, looking at how intercultural competency serves as a quantifiable gauge of readiness for teachers, staff, and students.

INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE AS AN INSTITUTIONAL OUTCOME

The development of intercultural competence among students, instructors, and staff is one way to assess the efficiency of internationalization. While leadership and structure offer the framework, intercultural competence represents the lived reality of readiness to an organization's ability to create understanding, empathy, and collaboration across cultural barriers. According to the research, intercultural competency is not only an educational goal but also a marker of institutional maturity in global participation. Abdul-Rahaman, Arkorful, and Okereke (2022) analyzed data from a variety of higher education settings and concluded that intentional training and exposure to multicultural experiences improve academic integration and cross-cultural understanding significantly. Their systematic review revealed that universities treating intercultural competence as a measurable outcome, using surveys, portfolios, and reflective assessments, reported greater alignment between program design and learning results. These institutions saw competency as a shared institutional responsibility, rather than a student trait acquired by accident. Benavides (2019) presented a specific example when he evaluated the Intercultural Leadership Program at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Students that engaged in structured experiential learning activities demonstrated measurable increases in cultural understanding, adaptability, and leadership aptitude. Benavides observed that intercultural competence grows most successfully when learning is scaffolded, reflective, and linked to real-world institutional contexts. His findings are particularly important for Midwestern colleges looking for cost-effective, scalable strategies to integrate global learning into campus life.

Ward (2017) broadened this perspective to include staff and teachers, highlighting that intercultural competence must go beyond the classroom. Her concept for broad internationalization emphasizes professional growth and staff training as critical components of readiness. When workers in student affairs, advising, and housing receive intercultural training, colleges can build cohesive settings that model inclusiveness. This alignment enhances learning outcomes and strengthens the institutional culture. Choi *et al*. (2021) reaffirmed the significance of faculty engagement. Their poll

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discovered that instructors who received intercultural training were more likely to internationalize course content, use global examples, and assist different student populations. They did, however, report some impediments, such as insufficient recognition in tenure and promotion processes.

Without institutional incentives, intercultural competency varies across disciplines. Measurement remains a methodological difficulty. Lundula (2024) established a three-dimensional approach (cognitive, emotional, and behavioral) for institutions to assess intercultural competency holistically. The cognitive dimension entails comprehending cultural systems and global challenges; the emotional dimension includes empathy and openness; and the behavioral dimension reflects communication and adaptation. Her concept emphasizes that competence is progressive rather than binary, necessitating ongoing reflection and feedback. Jessani, Nyirenda, and Taylor (2020) emphasized another layer: the relationship between institutional incentives and individual motivation. Their findings show that when colleges include intercultural competency in promotion criteria, professors invest more heavily in international collaboration and pedagogy. Without such institutional reinforcement, competency development is based on human interests rather than systemic commitments.

Throughout these studies, intercultural competence is portrayed as both a process and a consequence of preparation. It indicates that leadership, policy, and pedagogy are working together. Institutions that assess and promote intercultural competency exhibit both ethical commitment and educational efficiency. For Midwestern universities, implementing such assessment systems allows them to measure success without relying exclusively on mobility data or budget size. The next section expands this foundation by looking at how curriculum and pedagogy are the major means by which intercultural competence becomes an enduring part of academic experience.

CURRICULUM AND PEDAGOGY AS THE ANCHOR OF READINESS

Curriculum and pedagogy are the most evident indicators of institutional readiness. They represent the intersection of leadership vision and structural investment with student learning experiences. According to the literature, the classroom serves as the foundation for long-term global participation, where intercultural competence is developed, measured, and refined. Hawks (2021) contends that innovative teaching promotes resilience in global learning. His research on virtual exchange, Global Learning Communities, and Global Service-Learning initiatives demonstrates how technology and collaboration may broaden access to intercultural learning beyond physical mobility. He observes that these methods democratize participation by allowing students from many socioeconomic backgrounds to engage in cross-cultural conversation without incurring the costs of studying abroad. For Midwestern institutions with limited travel budgets and visas, such ideas offer an economical avenue to global involvement while promoting diversity.

Jarrar (2023) broadens this argument using the perspective of internationalization at Home, highlighting that globally oriented learning can take place exclusively on campus. Her research shows that when multicultural ideas are integrated into current courses, programs, and co-curricular activities, students develop intercultural skills comparable to those acquired abroad. Jarrar concludes that internationalization at Home converts the institution into a global learning environment, which is clearly aligned with the concept of institutional readiness. Ward (2017) places pedagogy within a larger institutional context. Her work for the American Council on Education demonstrates how academic and student affairs must be integrated to ensure broad internationalization. She proposes integrating classroom instruction with residence life, advising, and leadership activities to create a cohesive intercultural learning environment. This model reflects a system's view of readiness, in which curriculum improvement and student development reinforce one another. Benavides (2019) provides empirical support for this method by evaluating a Midwestern university's Intercultural Leadership Program. His findings indicate that systematic reflection, dialogue, and experiential learning improve students' abilities to manage cultural differences. Participants expressed increased confidence in leadership and empathy across cultures. These findings demonstrate that teaching and leadership development can work together to increase readiness.

The literature emphasizes the importance of balancing mobility and home-based methods. Zarges (2016) examined short-term study abroad programs and discovered that learning outcomes frequently stagnate without systematic pre-

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departure preparation and post-return feedback. Hawks (2021) noted that movement alone does not ensure intercultural learning. The conclusion for administrators is that preparation is determined not by the number of overseas experiences delivered, but by their educational design. Gaitán-Aguilar, Hofhuis, and Jansz (2024) support this notion with a thorough evaluation of global citizenship education. They suggest that programs that promote critical thought, ethical reasoning, and social responsibility result in deeper intercultural learning than those that only focus on cultural immersion. Their conclusion enhances the case for including intercultural teaching in discipline curriculum rather than treating it as a supplementary activity.

These studies show that the operational core of institutional readiness is curriculum and pedagogy. Universities justify their institutional missions and improve student learning when their teaching methods are in line with intercultural outcomes. Pedagogical innovation provides a workable way to make up for structural and financial constraints in the Midwestern setting. Universities that make investments in technology-enabled collaboration, classroom innovation, and faculty development show that imagination is just as important as money in achieving preparedness. The human element that supports these educational initiatives, faculty and staff engagement, is covered in the following section. The degree to which internationalization permeates campus life ultimately depends on their development, motivation, and acknowledgment.

FACULTY AND STAFF ENGAGEMENT AND INCENTIVES

No institution can attain readiness without active participation from its teachers and personnel. While senior administrators establish the vision, it is the day-to-day effort of teaching, advising, and program coordination that brings internationalization to fruition. The literature repeatedly underlines the importance of faculty and staff engagement in determining the depth and sustainability of multicultural activities. Without significant incentives, training, and recognition, internationalization remains a peripheral aspect of academic life. According to Choi, Lee, and Trent (2021), institutional support and recognition have a significant impact on teacher involvement. Their survey of Midwestern institutions found that professors are more likely to incorporate global information into their courses when they receive formal recognition in workload assignments or performance reviews.

But when global engagement is viewed as an extracurricular activity or as volunteer work, participation drastically drops. Indicating that intercultural participation is expected rather than optional, these results support Ward's (2017) recommendation that institutions incorporate internationalization into promotion and tenure requirements.

In 2019, Romani-Dias, Vasquez, and Carter introduced an additional layer by establishing a connection between institutional preparation and work satisfaction. According to their research, faculty members who believe that their institutions value international collaboration are more innovative and motivated. In contrast, when administrators do not provide rewards for global participation, academic members feel overburdened and alone. According to this pattern, preparedness and morale are correlated: organizations that support professional development via international interaction strengthen organizational capability and individual well-being.

Three recurring issues were identified by Jessani, Nyirenda, and Taylor (2020) when they looked at the obstacles that prevent faculty members from taking part in international initiatives: heavy workloads, a lack of finance, and poor institutional coordination. They contend that in the absence of formal incentives like internal funding, course releases, or recognition prizes, internationalization initiatives often concentrate around a small number of dedicated individuals rather than extending throughout departments. Their results are consistent with those of Choi *et al*. (2021), emphasizing that fair resource distribution and open communication regarding expectations are necessary for sustainable readiness.

Although less researched, staff participation is just as important. According to Findlay (2020), student affairs workers are essential to the implementation of multicultural programs, but they frequently lack institutional recognition and specialized training. Her poll found that while most people were excited about global projects, many were frustrated by the lack of staff and the uneven backing of the leadership. According to Ward (2017), intercultural competency training for staff members improves uniformity in student programming, housing, and advising, creating a

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cohesive campus atmosphere that exemplifies inclusivity. Engagement without critical evaluation can inadvertently perpetuate prevailing cultural norms, Hassan (2025) warned. Her examination of institutional culture revealed that if intercultural training concentrates primarily on superficial cultural understanding rather than structural equity, staff members may replicate exclusionary practices. To guarantee true diversity, she advocates for professional development that incorporates critical discourse, cultural humility, and policy understanding. Schools that are successful at involving their professors and staff have a few things in common. They create cross-departmental committees that permit shared ownership of global activities, offer grants or rewards for international teaching and research, and offer professional development opportunities connected to career growth. These practices turn internationalization into a collaborative endeavor rather than a decree from the government. Since many universities in the Midwest have tight finances, incentive schemes frequently need to be more innovative than extravagant. Even with minor financial advantages, Barnes and Gearin (2021) discovered that departments that share responsibility for internationalization under distributed leadership models are more engaged. Peer recognition and collaborative decision-making produce social incentives that have the potential to be just as potent as monetary ones. There is broad agreement in the literature that faculty and staff empowerment and motivation are key factors in determining institutional readiness. Global engagement efforts stall in the absence of regular rewards, clear goals, and accessible training. When institutions create mechanisms that recognize intercultural work as a component of professional success, readiness becomes self-reinforcing. The subsequent section broadens the discussion on student life, investigating how administrative alignment between student affairs and academic units influences campus climate and inclusivity.

STUDENT SERVICES, CAMPUS CLIMATE, AND INCLUSION

Institutional readiness goes beyond strategy and education. It is evident in how students navigate campus life and if support mechanisms facilitate genuine multicultural contact. The literature clearly shows that without an inclusive campus climate; even well-designed initiatives can fail to generate long-term intercultural progress. Student affairs personnel, advisors, and program directors are at the forefront of this readiness. Findlay (2020) found that Midwestern student affairs divisions frequently have strong sentiments regarding internationalization but are under structural strain. Many organizations do not have professionals who are specifically trained in intercultural communication or cross-cultural therapy. As a result, programs geared to welcome international students prioritize coordination over integration. Findlay argued that readiness is dependent on shifting from service providing to relationship development, which ensures that international and domestic students learn alongside and from one another. Ward (2017) proposed a model of "whole-campus engagement," in which student affairs, academic units, and leadership work together to produce coherent experiences. This concept integrates advising, residence living, and co-curricular study within a common intercultural framework. Ward's method is especially relevant for Midwestern campuses, where administrative silos are prevalent. She proved that when offices organize programs, such as multicultural events, peer mentorship, and leadership training, students report feeling more connected and confident in their intercultural abilities.

Hassan (2025) offered a critical perspective on inclusion, pointing out that organizations frequently use diversity jargon without challenging underlying hierarchies. Her research on cultural hegemony in higher education discovered that policies branded as inclusive might nonetheless favor Western standards in communication, curriculum, and evaluation. This caution emphasizes the significance of cultural humility and reflexivity in policy creation for Midwestern universities with lower international populations and a stronger emphasis on local culture.

Choi *et al*. (2021) found that academic advice and classroom engagement significantly impacted the experiences of domestic and international students. When instructors and advisors receive intercultural training, students report a more supportive environment and improved academic integration. In contrast, irregular training or staff turnover results in fragmented support. This research emphasizes the connection between student results and human resource development, reaffirming that readiness is an institution-wide activity.

Headrick (2003) provided examples of how community colleges have used regional cooperation to modify support models for foreign

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and immigrant students. His Midwestern examples showed that by combining funds for multicultural activities, mentorship programs, and language instruction, even universities with tight budgets may improve inclusiveness. These instances demonstrate that collaborations and ingenuity, not just scale, can lead to readiness.

The literature also highlights the social and emotional aspects of inclusion. Intercultural competence grows most effectively when students experience psychological safety and value, according to Abdul-Rahaman *et al*. (2022). This process is directly impacted by support programs that recognize the difficulties associated with identity and cultural transformation. Support services that recognize the difficulties associated with cultural change and identification play a direct part in this process. Similarly, Hawks (2021) discovered that when student affairs professionals assist with structured reflection, virtual exchange initiatives not only increase academic collaboration but also cultivate empathy and global citizenship.

Therefore, policy, training, and student involvement must all be in harmony for there to be a unified campus climate. Academic measures alone cannot measure readiness; students' interactions with the university community must also reflect this. In the Midwest, international students' sense of belonging frequently acts as an unofficial indicator of readiness, showing how successfully the school strikes a balance between local identity and global openness.

The next part situates these institutional and cultural dynamics within the broader regional and policy context, examining how Midwestern conditions shape the pursuit of internationalization and readiness.

MIDWEST REGIONAL CONTEXT AND POLICY LANDSCAPE

The regional context influences how institutional readiness is defined, funded, and sustained. Universities in the Midwest frequently attempt global engagement while operating under different limitations than coastal or metropolitan institutions. Limited state support, fluctuating enrollment, and public goals focused on local service all contribute to an atmosphere in which internationalization must be carefully balanced against regional accountability. Jons (2012) observed that Midwestern colleges frequently face significant community expectations to serve local communities first. Leaders must consequently depict internationalization not as a diversion of resources, but rather as a means of strengthening regional vitality. She chronicled how administrators redefined global participation by forming collaborations that brought international students to remote schools, increased cultural variety in local communities, and created new economic prospects. Jons concluded that combining global aims with local relevance is critical to establishing credibility for internationalization in the Midwest. Findlay (2020) supported this interpretation with her study of student affairs professionals at Midwestern colleges. She discovered that administrators favor intercultural projects but confront practical challenges such as restricted funds and staff shortages. Even when institutional missions emphasize global engagement, inconsistency in state support hampers the formation of sustainable programs. Findlay discovered that institutions adapt to these issues by establishing innovative, low-cost initiatives such as online cooperation, shared regional consortia, and relationships with community organizations. Headrick (2003) provided comparable observations from community institutions, which serve a significant section of the Midwest's student population. His cases demonstrated that these colleges frequently excel in accessibility while lagging in global programming. Nonetheless, via regional cooperation, they were able to implement multicultural courses and cross-institutional mentoring. Headrick's findings show that readiness can be achieved even without huge financial reserves, provided there is ongoing regional collaboration and administrative coordination.

Soler, Kim, and Cecil's (2022) national mapping study offered a broader comparison perspective. Their findings revealed that Midwestern institutions have lower levels of participation in study abroad and fewer formal foreign collaborations than universities in other regions. However, they perform similarly in terms of administrative organization and student services. The inference is that, while structural preparation exists, it has not yet been matched by widespread cultural or curriculum change. Soler and colleagues argue that this disparity is due to resource constraints rather than a lack of desire or skill.

Regional demographics also influence readiness. Domestic students may have limited intercultural exposure due to the Midwest's homogeneous

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populations and smaller international student bodies. Hawks (2021) and Benavides (2019) agree that this setting emphasizes the need for on-campus global learning models like Virtual Exchange and Intercultural Leadership Programs. These programs make up for limited mobility by incorporating intercultural experiences into the daily academic setting.

Policy frameworks help to shape regional readiness. State governments' frequent emphasis on workforce development and local economic impact may limit funding for international initiatives that are seen as supplemental to primary educational goals (Jons, 2012; Findlay, 2020; Headrick, 2003; Miller, 2023; De Wit & Deca, 2020). However, Miller (2023) and De Wit and Deca (2020) contend that global participation directly helps regional competitiveness through innovation, partnerships, and civic education. For Midwestern leaders, communicating this relationship is critical to gaining political and financial support. Overall, the Midwest creates a conundrum. Its institutions typically enunciate global goals and have strong leadership, but structural and cultural constraints impede their advancement. The regional environment promotes pragmatism and innovation, resulting in a unique model of internationalization that is incremental, collaborative, and community-oriented. Understanding the context is critical for interpreting readiness data and devising actions that are feasible rather than idealized.

The next part examines the theoretical and methodological frameworks that scholars employ to describe and investigate these dynamics, emphasizing how they clarify the relationship between leadership, structure, and institutional change.

INTEGRATIVE FRAMEWORKS AND METHODOLOGICAL APPROACHES

Multiple theoretical and methodological traditions inform research on intercultural leadership and institutional readiness. These concepts describe how leadership actions, organizational structures, and cultural dynamics influence readiness results. They also provide methods for evaluating internationalization as a systemic and dynamic process, rather than a collection of isolated activities. Comprehensive internationalization (CI) is still the most extensively used framework. De Wit and Deca (2020) define CI as a whole-institution strategy that incorporates global perspectives into all functions, including governance, teaching, research, and community engagement. Leadership commitment and organizational alignment are essential criteria in this paradigm. The CI concept is especially applicable for Midwestern institutions because it prioritizes incremental improvement and contextual adaptability over a one-size-fits-all approach.

Organizational change theory offers a complementary perspective. Kuffuor, Mensah, and Boateng (2024) used Kotter's eight-step change model to illustrate how colleges develop readiness. They proved that readiness emerges from cycles of communication, coalition building, and institutionalization. Their research links leadership behavior to structural consequences, demonstrating that successful leaders view change as collaborative learning rather than top-down reform. Miller (2023) enhanced this conversation by introducing adaptive leadership theory, which emphasizes adaptability, experimentation, and stakeholder collaboration as critical competencies in complex educational environments.

Theories of intercultural competency add a human-centered dimension to these organizational frameworks. Lundula (2024) proposed a three-part paradigm (cognitive, emotional, and behavioral) that connects individual development to institutional culture. Her paradigm expands on previous work in cultural intelligence, positioning leadership as both a student and a facilitator. By linking human growth to organizational outcomes, such models demonstrate how leadership and institutional preparation complement one another. Smithee (2012) offered a historical and conceptual synthesis that integrated perspectives on leadership and change. He mapped the transition of internationalization leadership from centralized administrative oversight to decentralized, collaborative frameworks. This transition reflects the larger shift in organizational thinking from hierarchical to networked modes of governance. Barnes and Gearin (2021) documented comparable tendencies in practice, demonstrating how distributed leadership networks promote resilience and continuity.

Methodologically, the literature employs both qualitative and quantitative methodologies, with case studies remaining prevalent. Qualitative research, such as that conducted by Jons (2012), Ahwireng (2016), and Findlay (2020), captures administrators' lived experiences as they navigate competing institutional demands. These studies

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highlight political and cultural complexities that quantitative surveys may overlook. At the same time, national mapping efforts such as Soler, Kim, and Cecil's (2022) provide significant benchmarks, allowing for macro-level comparisons of readiness indicators across institutions and regions. Mixed-method approaches are emerging as an exciting trend. Abdul-Rahaman *et al*. (2022) propose combining surveys, interviews, and document analysis to capture both perception and performance. They suggest that readiness should be viewed as a dynamic system, detectable through quantitative indicators but also modified by human narratives. Similarly, Benavides (2019) and Hawks (2021) combine program assessment statistics and qualitative insights to examine how specific programs promote intercultural competency. These analytical innovations are particularly important for future Midwest study. The region's institutional diversity, community colleges, regional publics, and research universities require designs that can be compared across contexts while reflecting local specifics. Longitudinal studies and examinations that link administrative actions to long-term student or teacher outcomes are extremely rare. Addressing these shortcomings would necessitate frameworks that view internationalization as a dynamic process of organizational learning rather than a fixed objective.

The theoretical and methodological literature all point to the same conclusion: readiness is relational. It emerges from the interplay between leadership, policy, pedagogy, and people. Frameworks like comprehensive internationalization, adaptive leadership, and intercultural competency provide complementary perspectives on this dynamic. Methodologically, the most illuminating research strikes a compromise between depth and generalizability, combining contextual richness with comparative rigor. The next section summarizes the patterns across all themes, indicating where the literature converges, diverges, and where crucial gaps remain for future research.

Synthesis and Gaps

A consistent theme emerges from the literature: intercultural leadership is the most reliable factor in determining institutional readiness, although its effects vary depending on context, culture, and structure. Universities that attain readiness do so by tying together inclusive pedagogy, sustaining resources, and integrated governance with leadership vision. These links distinguish systemic change from symbolic internationalization.

The primary tool for coordinating objectives and activities is leadership. Internationalization gets ingrained in the institutional identity when senior administrators clearly define their vision and integrate it into funds, policy, and communication. However, leadership effectiveness is conditional. Leaders are only successful when they delegate responsibility and foster a sense of shared ownership among faculty, staff, and students, as noted by Smithee (2012), Sullivan (2011), and Ahwireng (2016). Leadership that is purely performative, consisting of statements without action, creates short-lived initiatives. Structural readiness strengthens this leadership foundation.

According to research by Findlay (2020) and Soler *et al*. (2022), solid finance, strategic goals, and offices of global involvement are essential for maintaining momentum. Still, structure is not sufficient. Formal frameworks run the risk of turning into bureaucratic shells in the absence of human investment, such as training, incentives, and recognition. Participation follows perceived value and institutional reward, according to research on faculty and staff involvement (Choi *et al*., 2021; Romani-Dias *et al*., 2019; Jessani *et al*., 2020).

Innovation in curriculum and pedagogy converts readiness into real learning. Studies on virtual exchange, internationalization at home, and experiential programs (Hawks, 2021; Jarrar, 2023; Benavides, 2019) indicate that practice and reflection, rather than exposure, are the ways in which intercultural competency develops. These initiatives also demonstrate how educational institutions may democratize access to international education, which is crucial for the Midwest's resource-constrained region.

At the cultural level, whether or not students and staff feel prepared depends on the campus climate and inclusivity. Hassan (2025), Abdul-Rahaman *et al*. (2022), and Ward (2017) all stress the need to align diversity rhetoric with practice and policy. A supportive atmosphere allows intercultural learning to take root; discriminatory or fragmented environments negate even well-funded programs.

The regional setting influences all of these dynamics. In the Midwest, readiness is limited by state finance, demography, and mission commitments, yet it is also enriched by community orientation and innovation under constraints (Jons, 2012; Headrick, 2003). The region's institutions have demonstrated that readiness can be developed

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via collaboration and inventiveness, not just financial strength. The theoretical and methodological literature backs up this multi-level perspective. Frameworks such as comprehensive internationalization (De Wit & Deca, 2020), adaptive leadership (Miller, 2023), and intercultural competence (Lundula, 2024) show readiness as a relational process. Methodologically, the field excels in case-based research but falls short in longitudinal and comparative approaches. This imbalance restricts our understanding of how readiness evolves or declines over time.

Three gaps stand out. First, there is a lack of longitudinal evidence tying leadership actions to measurable outcomes in intercultural competency or global participation. Most studies take a snapshot rather than a trajectory. Second, the Midwestern context is underrepresented in empirical studies. National surveys often aggregate data, hiding the region's unique constraints and advances. Third, research has rarely linked leadership development techniques to institutional transformation. While intercultural leaders' competencies are frequently described, their real impact on readiness systems is less researched.

These gaps guide further research. Research that combines administrator interviews, institutional data, and longitudinal research could shed light on how leadership practices evolve into readiness over time. Comparative research among Midwestern institutions could yield scalable approaches for resource allocation and collaboration. Mixed-methods techniques, based on complete internationalization frameworks, have the potential to better bridge theory and practice. Literature eventually depicts readiness as both a consequence and a capacity, a reflection of what institutions have accomplished and what they are willing to preserve. Leadership, organization, pedagogy, and culture all play a role in defining capability. Understanding and developing these links is a top priority for both scholars and practitioners.

Table 1: outlines the core components discussed across the review, identifying their primary drivers and the key institutional outcomes that serve as measurable indicators of success. This synthesis emphasizes that readiness requires a cohesive system, distinguishing it from merely symbolic internationalization

Component of Readiness	**Primary Driver / Description**	**Key Indicators of Success (Outcome)**	**Relevant Literature Support**
Intercultural Leadership	Provides the vision, advocacy, and strategic commitment for global engagement. It must be consistent and visible.	Sustained Initiatives; Alignment of incentives and policies; Shared ownership and resilience during leadership transitions.	Sullivan (2011); Ahwireng (2016); Barnes & Gearin (2021), Lundula (2024)
Structural Readiness	The necessary resources, governance, and infrastructure to implement the vision.	Financial Continuity; Centralized coordination with decentralized implementation; Dedicated global engagement offices and clear reporting lines.	Soler, Kim, & Cecil (2022); Findlay (2020); Ahwireng (2016)
Curriculum & Pedagogy	The primary means of delivering intercultural learning to all students.	Intercultural Competence (Cognitive, Emotional, Behavioral); Scalable models like Internationalization at Home and Virtual Exchange; Integration into core disciplines.	Hawks (2021); Jarrar (2023); Benavides (2019); Lundula (2024)
Faculty & Staff Engagement	The human element that translates policy into day-to-day practice.	Formal Recognition in promotion/tenure; Provision of specialized Intercultural Training; High morale and shared ownership across departments.	Choi, Lee, & Trent (2021); Ward (2017); Jessani, Nyirenda, & Taylor (2020)
Campus Climate & Inclusion	The lived reality of readiness, ensuring all students feel valued and supported.	Psychological Safety and a sense of belonging for all students; Alignment of student affairs programs with academic intercultural goals; Policies that challenge cultural hegemony.	Findlay (2020); Ward (2017); Hassan (2025); Abdul-Rahaman *et al*. (2022)

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CONCLUSION

Intercultural leadership and institutional preparation are inextricably linked in determining global engagement in higher education. The literature demonstrates that leadership offers the vision, structure, and advocacy required to launch change, whereas readiness reflects the institution's ability to sustain it. Together, they distinguish between symbolic internationalization and genuine transformation. Structural investment, faculty and staff participation, and inclusive pedagogy turn leadership intentions into institutional reality. For Midwestern colleges, funding constraints and regional mandates complicate the process while also encouraging innovation and community-based methods. In this setting, readiness becomes an exercise in imagination and adaptation rather than simply replicating coastal patterns. Future research should use longitudinal and comparative approaches to connect leadership practice and measured readiness outcomes. Such work might shed light on how intercultural leadership underpins internationalization in institutional purpose and turns limitations into capacity by emphasizing administrative views and regional dynamics.

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