

## **Trials and Tribulations of Developing International University Partnerships**

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### **Abstract**

*International university partnerships come in a variety of arrangements. They require effort, commitment and resources. The purpose of this paper is to explore one university's attempt at creating a study abroad program with a foreign university. The study includes an examination of the different partnership structures, an analysis of the protocol and procedures involved when working with a foreign institution, and an assessment of the logistics that go into implementing a study abroad program with a foreign institution.*

**Keywords:** international partnerships, exchanges, higher education

### **1. Introduction**

Institutions of higher education have sought to create international partnerships across the globe in a variety of ways. Study abroad programs; student, faculty and research exchange programs; dual degree programs and the like have existed for many years and continue to thrive during these current tough economic times. Each of the various programs serve a different purpose and all have their advantages and disadvantages. The institutional or individual faculty member's goals and objectives determine the method and structure of an international partnership. At times the goals and objectives of an institution may vary from those of departments or faculty members trying to establish an international partnership. For example, during these financially challenging times, international students are seen as a way to increase student enrollment for many institutions across the United States, especially regional institutions in small towns or rural areas. Thus, institutions want full tuition paying students to come to their institutions, while a department or faculty member may want to do a one-to-one no cost exchange with an international partner.

Establishing international programs is at times difficult and can be time-consuming depending on the institution's emphasis on international partnerships. If the institution doesn't have a well-established international student program department, it is a difficult process for individual faculty members to launch international programs. The individual would need support in the form of funding and release time either from the institution or external grant opportunities. Otherwise, teaching a full load, along with completing research requirements and meeting service expectations would make it daunting for an individual to start an international partnership unaided. In contrast, if an institution already has an established international student program office, then staff members can help with the process and establish connections that will allow for the partnership to be established in an efficient and productive manner.

Study abroad programs provide students who are pursuing college degrees of all disciplines a unique opportunity to experience cultures around the world. In teacher education programs specifically, giving students the chance to take classes, teach students, and observe cultures can provide first-hand knowledge of a world where cultural boundaries are being transcended.

There are various ways study abroad programs can be created by universities, such as using a private study abroad program vendor, working with an international recruiting agent or partnering with another university. Each of these options have their own advantages and disadvantages for a university.

Using a private vendor or recruiting agent translates into a higher financial burden to students or universities. However, the private vendor or agent will take care of arrangements such as transportation, housing, educational and cultural visits. One of the factors that universities have to consider is the reputation and reliability of the vendor or agent. The other main consideration is the ability to customize the program to fit the needs of the institution.

Working directly with a foreign university provides the option of customizing the study abroad program to suit specific goals and objectives. University partnerships will also help reduce the cost of programs for either the student or the university. However there are several critical areas that have to be navigated before a partnership can be established. These areas include language and cultural barriers, mutual goals and objectives, and logistics.

The purpose of this study is to explore one university's attempt at creating a study abroad program with a foreign university. The study includes an analysis of the various avenues to create a partnership with a foreign university, an examination of the protocol and procedures in working with a foreign institution, and an assessment of the logistics that go into implementing a study abroad program with a foreign institution.

## 2. Literature Review

For the purposes of this paper, the term partnership can be defined as

[A]n arrangement that goes beyond technical assistance and external support... a partnership must involve a collaboration that can reasonably be expected to have mutual (though not necessarily identical) benefits, that will contribute to the development of institutional and individual capacities at both institutions, that respects the sovereignty and autonomy of both institutions, and that is itself empowering, enabling both partners to specify goals, chart directions, create appropriate governance strategies, employ effective administrative routines, and focus human, material, and financial resources on high priority objectives (Samoff and Carrol, p. 116, 2004).

An examination of relevant literature detailing studies and experiences with developing and maintaining international partnerships, revealed several important factors for consideration: program structure, cultural differences, financial challenges, accommodation, student and faculty participation and selection, responsibilities of participating schools, evaluation methods.

Different program structures include faculty/student exchanges or study abroad programs and partnerships with foreign universities which can assume a variety of approaches from internships to joint degrees to establishing a full-service campus abroad. In the past, these arrangements often failed due to lack of understanding and clarity around responsibilities and expectations (Fischer, 2012).

Cultural differences and barriers are cited among researchers as reasons for program tension (Ayoubi and Massoud, 2012). For example, in 2011, Yale University released final plans to establish a joint partnership with National University of Singapore. Concerns were raised regarding the Singapore government's stance on issues such as homosexuality and freedom of expression. Yale administration stated that, "our agreement with NUS... affirms consistency with Yale's policy on nondiscrimination," though the author of *Yale in Singapore: Lost in Translation* had grave reservations about such a claim (Miller, 2011).

Language can also pose a significant cultural barrier. In one partnership between United States and Korean universities, language was cited as an issue:

Korean and American students equally voiced the frustration in lack of or delayed response, having to use an intermediary as translator that often prolonged communication lapses and not having the words to make oneself understood in face-to-face interaction. The language barrier made some Korean students hesitate to use existing communication channels, such as e-mail and instant messaging. It was quite time consuming for those who reported that to send an e-mail containing even a couple of paragraphs meant hiring an English translator. Such delayed processes could cause misunderstanding between the partners (DeLong, Geum, Gage, McKinney, Medvedev and Park, 2009).

Financial challenges with the global economy have placed pressure on many international partnerships. Countries like South Korea who have seen their rate of currency exchange plummet have also seen the numbers of their students studying overseas decline (Hvistendahl, 2009). College and university administrators such as Rick Trainor of King's College London argue the economic crisis only strengthens the need for more international associations, "To cut partnerships in international higher ed right now would be a profound mistake...When the economic upturn comes, we will need such international collaboration. We all need each other to prosper" (Hvistendahl, para. 10, 2009). Colleges and universities are realizing they need to be producing graduates who can thrive and participate in a global economy.

International partnerships are increasingly being viewed in conjunction with national governmental policy-making. In 2009, President Obama promoted educational connections between India and the United States. Similarly, Prime Minister David Cameron made a move to intensify educational ties between the United Kingdom and China (Labi, 2010).

Takoi K. Hamrita, a professor of electrical engineering at the University of Georgia, detailed her experience with founding the award-winning UGA-Tunisia Educational Partnership in an article titled, *Building a Holistic International Educational Partnership: Collaboration Between the University of Georgia and the Tunisian Higher Education System* (2012). The program development began with a comprehensive needs assessment, examining and aligning mutual goals and needs. Secondly, she established a multi-disciplinary team, including a variety of departments, disciplines, and administrators in order to "capitalize on the expertise and intellectual capacity needed for this project" (Hamrita, p. 7, 2012). She focused on building assessment mechanisms and an e-learning component. Hamrita describes the program as "a strategic, significant, and sustainable link" including "continuous dialogue, ongoing self-assessment, holistic professional development, and fostering a collaborative framework" (p. 13-14, 2012).

The Chancellor of Washington University in St. Louis also embraced the multi-disciplinary approach, but concentrated on using international research collaborations to address global issues such as clean energy (Fischer, 2009). The university offered \$500,000 in faculty grants for energy-focused proposals. Faculty were required to work with a foreign partner. The program delivered several benefits including robust networking opportunities for faculty, an annual study abroad program for students, and positively impacted faculty recruitment (Fischer, 2009).

Due to the substantial commitment of resources, many universities enter into international partnerships with a foundational period of relationship-building. When Queensland University of Technology in Australia and Minnesota State University Mankato in the United States began the process of establishing a partnership for their student teaching abroad program, two years elapsed before the program was actually implemented. During that time, a rapport and connection were forged which led to decisions on the program structure, accommodation and accountabilities on both sides (Hurwood and Werhan, 2011).

Due to the frequent turnover in academic administration, there are instances where a university president or chancellor leads the charge for an international partnership, only to have it perish when the administrator leaves to take a position at another university. Successful international partnerships need to be sustainable through leadership changes and transitions. Often these partnerships need "a champion" and many programs have found success through faculty advocates (Wood, n.d.).

In sum, the successful international partnerships tended to comprise multi-disciplinary resources from across campuses but also have a consistent champion, are attractive to researchers who want to perform international work, address global challenges, give students a global perspective, and have clarity around outcomes, assessment mechanisms, and methods for addressing cultural barriers.

### **3. Discussion**

#### **3.1 Foot in the Door**

The (American institution) is located in the (location). It is a regional institution, nestled in a slowly developing town with a population of 60,000. In 2010 there was a push by upper administration and the Dean of the College of Education and Human Development (CEHD) at ULM to increase international partnerships. With that in mind, the CEHD set out to find international institutions that were willing to be partners with them.

One of the targeted countries was Japan for a variety of reasons, mainly being great cultural and educational system differences.

In an effort to establish an international partnership with a university in Japan, the first obstacle that had to be overcome was to get a foot in the door. This becomes complicated due to the language barrier and depending on the rank of the institutions. The way to overcome this was to find a person who had the same vision and interest. One method is to have international faculty members on your faculty, who can help establish partnerships with institutions they graduated from or one in their country. Another way to meet such people is at international conferences, such as Society for Information Technology and Teacher Education International conference (SITE), Hawaii International Conference on Education (HICE). Since there were no faculty at (American institution) from Japan, meeting faculty members at conferences were explored. Luckily, at the SITE conference a connection was established with a professor from (Japanese institution).

### **3.2 Establishing Common Goals and Building Relationships**

Through email communications common goals were established and a site visit to (Japanese institution) was arranged. The purpose of the visit was to get to know the area, the university, local schools and the faculty of (Japanese institution). The visit also involved fact-finding and further establishing the relationship. During the one week visit, parameters of the exchange program were outlined. A face-to-face meeting occurred with various stakeholders who would be critical players in the exchange. And, finally, information was gathered about the town, including safety considerations for (American institution) students. Additionally a visit by the two lead professors from (Japanese institution) was planned. Similar to the (American institution) faculty member's visit, their visit was to continue deepening the relationship, further iron out the exchange details and perform fact-finding about the town. The parameters of the partnership were established during these face-to-face visits. The parameters of the exchange comprised of a two week cultural exchange for 10 students from each institution per year and two students from each institution for a year-long educational exchange. These exchanges were based on mutual and institutional interest, which was a very important element in making a partnership that everyone was happy with.

### **3.3 Financial Burden**

Study abroad programs are a financial burden on students and the one to Japan for students from (American institution) was no exception. It would cost approximately \$2,500 for a two week trip that included airfare, room and board. Any site-seeing venture would be an additional cost to the students would. In an effort to assist students at (American institution) we made this program a part of the course work, so students on financial aid could apply for financial aid to go to Japan. In addition, funding was requested and awarded by Academic Affairs in the amount of \$500 to help support the trip. The two lead faculty members from (Japanese institution) applied for and received grants to help fund students from (Japanese institution) for the two week exchange program, in addition to providing \$1,000 for (American institution) students to go to (Japanese institution). The financial burden to (American institution) students who were interested in going became minimal.

However even with those support systems in place we were only able to recruit 4 students at first and out of those 4 only one actually travelled. This was due to a variety of reasons, but one of the reasons stated was the fact that while they did receive funding to help facilitate the trip, they would lose money by not working their part time jobs during the two weeks.

### **3.4 Logistics**

The first step in organizing the visit for both sides was fixing the date of the trips. Due to the different academic calendars of both institutions, it was a bit complicated. Japan's academic calendar is from July until March, while (American institution's) academic calendar is August until May. After considering several other factors such as exams, school vacations and faculty availability to help facilitate the trip, dates were fixed. The next step in the process was recruiting students who were interested in going on the trip. Promotional materials were designed and distributed to students at both institutions. It is vital that faculty members promote and encourage students to part take in study abroad programs. Since neither university's students had visited each other, the organizing faculty members had to become good salespeople to help recruit and assure students that the experience would be a good and enriching one. (Japanese institution) had an application process to select their students, while (American institution) did not.

This was mainly due to the fact that there were more students interested in coming to America from (Japanese institution) than there were students from (American institution) interested in going to (Japanese institution). Once the students were recruited, the next step was taking care of transportation, travel documents, and the itinerary, including any special needs. This took a lot of time and effort by the organizing faculty members. There was no monetary reward for the faculty members, nor was it documented on their tenure and promotion document. Once the students arrived at the host institutions, the responsibility fell on the organizing faculty members of those institutions to be the educational and cultural tour guide. This also took a lot of time and energy.

#### **4. Conclusion/Recommendations**

The first step in establishing an international partnership is to clearly define what the purpose and goals of the partnership will be and the cost and time factors involved. Once you have established the purpose and goals of the partnerships the next step is to find an institution in the desired country that has the same academic values, purpose, goals and objectives for an international partnership. If these values do not align it might be difficult to establish a mutually beneficial and collaborative partnership. By having similar academic standards, financial resources, student population and geographic setting (metropolitan, small town or rural) it allows both interested institutions to work together to create programs that will help enhance academic and cultural growth in their respective institutions.

During these economic times establishing international partnerships is a financial burden to institutions, thus having similar financial backgrounds will allow for mutual understanding and cooperation when dealing with cost factors. Cost sharing, collaborating on research and exchange grants are some examples that institutions can use to work together to create partnerships while the global economy recovers. International student programs can be money generators if each institution requires that students have to pay tuition at their host institution. While this is profitable for the institution, it does at times conflict with the goals and objectives of faculty members who are interested in doing academic research or exchange. Having students pay for tuition can discourage some international partnerships if that other institution is purely looking for academic exchange or research.

Creating international partnerships allows for campuses to diversify their student population and also serves as an opportunity for institutions to attract faculty members and communities to interact with an international population. At times this interaction has led to economic development between cities where two institutions are located. International partnerships, if developed well, can bring countless benefits to universities and faculty, from collaborating on different teaching methods to solving universal issues. Perhaps even more important, these partnerships have the capacity to change students' lives forever, creating future generations of global citizens.

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