

Avoiding the Pitfalls of Partnerships

GO SLOW. Get to know your partner first before diving headlong into a relationship that may be fraught with unforeseen challenges. Make sure your goals and expectations are clear.

This may sound like dating advice, but it works just as well for institutional relationships.

Veteran international education administrators passed on this wisdom for colleagues who are contemplating international partnerships and they stressed the need for careful planning and precautions to ensure a positive working relationship.

LESSON #1

Follow Your Own Advice

A dual degree was supposed to be the payoff for students enrolled in a private Jamaican institution that formed a partnership with the University of North Florida (UNF). Its students were to enroll in UNF after having secured the equivalent of an associate's degree in the arts. But because most turned out to possess an associate of science degree, which required additional coursework, not all credit could be transferred to UNF. So, instead of taking two additional years to receive a bachelor of business administration from UNF, the Jamaican students had to spend an average of three more years. They were understandably upset, according to Jeff Michelman, associate dean for undergraduate studies.

UNF delivered the courses on site, flying an instructor to Jamaica each weekend to teach eight hours on Sundays, for a total of five sessions for each course.

"We didn't take our own advice, to go slow and spend some time dating," Michelman says. "We did not make sure the courses would be accepted. We are a public institution and can't change accreditation requirements."

When UNF saw red flags during the first year, the university told their Jamaican partner that it would finish this cohort, but not sign up again. Approximately 50 Jamaican students started out in 2000, with 30 continuing; of those, 25 graduated.

"We had the best of intentions," Michelman says. "They were in our part of the world and we thought we'd give their students an international outlook, as well as inter-

nationalize our faculty. But some key personnel on both ends didn't follow through on necessary aspects."

In another instance, a three-way partnership between UNF and universities in Latin America and Western Europe were enthusiastically embraced at first. Students would spend a semester in each university and come out with multiple degrees: MBA from UNF, MA from the western European institution, and a certificate of participation from the Latin American university. This would take a total of 15 months. The first semester was online, each institution teaching one course.

UNF sent 15 students over two years, but the other institutions enrolled very few. "They didn't have the institutional infrastructure or commitment to recruit their students," Michelman says.

"Our students' expectations were dashed," Kate Mattingly Learch, associate director of international business at UNF, says, "because they were told they would be in classes with international students." It turned out there was only one student from the host country in each class, and therefore little intercultural interaction.

In still another example, speed was the enemy. In its first attempt at a double degree, a Western European public university wanted to set up things quickly and became frustrated when UNF asked to slow down the process. UNF took a financial hit but terminated the relationship rather than continue.

LESSON #2

Make Sure Partnerships Are Balanced

In any university partnership agreement there needs to be a balance of exchanges, but sometimes it gets skewed to one side. Hogeschool Utrecht (HU) University of Applied Sciences in Utrecht, Netherlands, sends hundreds of students overseas for student exchanges but sometimes does not receive an equal number in return.

In 2008 HU began an exchange with the Cork Institute of Technology in Ireland, but HU sent more students



SUNY Canton students at Whiteface Mountain with Russian students in a dual degree program.

there than Cork did to the Dutch school. To alleviate this imbalance, HU came up with a creative solution, which they wrote into the student exchange agreement. Each year, 30 Cork students would come to the Netherlands for a week to work on a collaborative assignment with Dutch students, tuition free. There were also discounted fees for accommodations and food.

“This involves a lot of organization and coordination, but it is a good investment and beneficial for both sides,” Simone Hackett, faculty coordinator for internationalization at HU, says. And it encourages Cork students to apply for a study abroad at HU at a later date.

Now the partnership is more balanced, in part because of the collaborative program that is still going on after four years.

HU has four international bachelor’s degree programs that are taught in English: communications and media, business and management studies, marketing management, and business for emerging markets. Each department has 400 to 700 students, and all are required to do either an internship or study abroad for a semester. Approximately 900 students go abroad each year. HU is continuing to look for additional partners, especially in the United States.

According to Hackett, more and more Dutch students want to go abroad, but the university needs to balance the flow and fill the seats at home; otherwise there could be financial implications. If Dutch students go abroad on a

student exchange and no students from partner universities replace them, Dutch universities are receiving funding for students they are not teaching.

Another issue is the level of English proficiency from overseas students. In some partnerships with Korean, Chinese, and Spanish institutions, the level of English has been low. HU has urged its partners to send only those with English proficiency good enough to participate in the academic courses. “They say ‘yes, yes,’ and figure once they arrive, they will pick up the English, but that is not happening,” Hackett says. “In addition to struggling in the academic classes, these students often feel isolated and can’t participate in activities because of the language barrier.” Approximately 40 to 50 come to HU from these universities each semester, and a similar number travels there from HU.

Hackett advises being strict from the beginning on the required level of English needed for exchange students. Currently, the school is exploring the possibility of providing English instruction for those in need through individual departments or the international office.

To make partnerships work well, Hackett recommends making sure schedules are in synch and lecturers are those interested in international teaching. And once you make a match, you must maintain it. “It is time consuming if you do it properly, but to make it work you need to keep in contact on a regular basis.”

LESSON #3

Do Your Homework First

Two dual-degrees programs—in Bosnia/Herzegovina and Russia—were part of the State University of New York Canton’s international partnerships for several years. These online programs led to degrees from both Canton and the overseas university.

According to Marela Fiacco, former director of international programs and now a visiting instructor, the Bosnia program started off well in 2006 because that institution developed its programs and curriculum based on Canton’s. Over four years, Bosnian students took finance, legal studies, and information systems courses. During the seven-year period, 400 Bosnians graduated with a bachelor of technology degree in finance, legal studies, and information technology.

“But, after a while we were being pushed quite a bit to change the program,” Fiacco says. The Bosnian partner wanted Canton to accept courses and to make program changes that were not feasible because of Canton’s established processes and protocols. They also wanted a lower tuition rate, but Canton, as a public university, had no flexibility on that matter.

In another program, geared to upper level finance students with a Russian university, a problem revolved around the transfer of credits from one institution to the other: Canton did so, but their Russian partner did not. Therefore, the Russian students were burdened with taking many more courses each semester to make up the difference in order to graduate in four years; that resulted in lower academic success. Only 10 Russians graduated with a bachelor’s of business administration in finance over the five years, from 2008–2013.

In good faith, Canton representatives traveled to Russia in 2012 to celebrate the graduation of the first cohort and to plan for future programs. At that time, the Russian university was merging with a larger federal university and, Fiacco says, “We laid out some necessary changes, such as the transfer of credits from our university, but it was evident they were not interested.”

Make Partnerships Sustainable From the Start

By Susan Buck Sutton

International partnerships are like all relationships—they are inevitably works in progress, with moments of difficulty and moments of collaborative success that transform everyone involved. Such moments are “teachable” ones, yielding new insights on what makes linkages work. Here are a few such lessons learned from my own adventures in the complex and wonderful world of collaborative internationalization.

- **Drive-by Memoranda of Understanding (MOU’s) often crash and burn.** Successful partnerships take the time to understand each other and weigh potential collaborations before signing agreements. Common goals are reached, possible projects identified, roadblocks removed, organizational structures put in place, and relevant constituencies and decision-makers engaged. This requires repeated conversation, careful listening, and openness to new ideas and possibilities.
- **Successful partnerships live up to their name.** “Partnership” refers to an alliance among co-principals, with shared rights, responsibilities, and commitment. Successful partnerships rest on principles of mutual benefit, joint decision-making, and honoring commitments. Partners work through difficulties that arise and stand by each other in moments of crisis. They value the intangible as well as the financial in measuring input.
- **Successful partnerships understand the relationship to be as important as any specific project.** They devote energy and resources to nurturing institutional and personal connections. Communication is frequent, characterized by repeated demonstrations of respect and enthusiasm for working together that form the matrix for new projects and initiatives.

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“Students from foreign countries are interested in our dual-degree programs because a U.S. degree has value,” Fiacco says. “Many obtain better jobs and greater acceptance to graduate schools as a result.”

Fiacco cautions anyone contemplating an international partnership to first make sure the partner’s courses are accredited. “If the school is not going to accept your courses, don’t do it.”

She also believes it is best for the foreign students to spend at least one semester in the U.S. institution, being part of the culture, getting to know the faculty, etc.

When reviewing agreements, Fiacco advises universities to “make sure you un-

derstand cultural differences. These play a huge role in how agreements are established and carried out. Do the homework if you want to have a successful program.”

LESSON #4

Get the Agreement Right

Sometimes the wrong people are at the table negotiating partnerships for which they don’t have authority. Sometimes promises are made that cannot be kept. Other times there is a lack of communication regarding the goals and outcomes of a particular partnership.

When a private European university sought a partnership with the University of



Graduation ceremony at Kazan with Russian students who achieved a dual bachelor's degree in business and administration from SUNY Canton and their Russian university partner.

Georgia (UGA) for joint research and training, UGA initially saw this as a good, niche partnership for one of its key centers. They created a general memorandum of understanding, but it was not specific enough. Georgia soon realized its partner wanted a broader-based relationship covering additional schools and disciplines. "They wanted something we couldn't give them at that time," Jane Gatewood, director of international partnerships, says. So the partnership was never established.

A partnership with an Asian university, funded through its government, ran into problems after non-authorized personnel promised tuition waivers and graduate assistantships. UGA opted to support the terms initially, but subsequently renegotiated them. "It's a good program and we value it, but initially it wasn't negotiated at the proper level," Gatewood says. "That has been fixed."

UGA has also tightened its procedures for initiating new programs, such as dual-degree programs, with an overseas university. In the past, faculty members might have gone to the international office for quick approval. "We don't do that anymore," Gatewood says. "We need to go through a specific process for a new degree, evaluate it like any other, and then add on the overseas partner and other international pieces."

"It's important to know who is authorized to sign international agreements," Gatewood says. Although a variety of UGA personnel have signed agreements in the past, now only two university people are authorized to do so: the president and his designee.

Overall, Gatewood attributes the majority of problems emanating from miscommu-

nication and misunderstanding on either side of the relationship. "When one partner doesn't understand the other, issues occur," she says. "It's important to make sure you're both on the same page in terms of what you want to accomplish with this partnership."

Tips for Avoiding Pitfalls

Many higher education institutions seek international partnerships to give their students and faculty a global perspective. But these relationships require special care if they are to be successful.

Going slow is essential; don't rush into a relationship before making sure everything is in place. Communication, both before partnerships are established and while the partnership is in effect, is impor-

tant. Phone calls, Skype, and personal visits can help keep tabs on how things are going and to deal with problems as they occur. All partners need to make a commitment to the project, making sure the necessary infrastructure is in place and that sufficient interest, effort, and funds are there. Balance, in terms of students, staff time, and resources is vital to a positive outcome.

A successful marriage requires a period of dating in which options and relationships are explored, developed, and revised before making a commitment. So do international partnerships. **IE**

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