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The Strategic Management Challenge for Research I Universities

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University planning documents and vision statements now routinely state the importance of internationalization. These statements often go beyond vague affirmations of global commitment and include specific goals for leveraging key international partnerships, to advance broader institutional strategic objectives and priorities. However, most major US research universities not only have innumerable existing international linkages but receive a constant stream of proposals for new student exchanges, cooperative education programs, establishment of branch campuses, and other activities. A deliberate, strategic approach is needed to manage these global engagements if they are to serve institutional goals.

Yet, as senior international officers and campus leaders attempt to transform these strategic goals into realities, they are often confronted with a paucity of tools to do so—policies, administrative structures, resources, and supporting consensus of key constituents. The highly decentralized governance and management structure common among US Research I universities, with considerable autonomy vested in deans, department heads, and individual faculty, can be a source of strength for broad-based, bottom-up internationalization. This structure also creates a formidable challenge for harnessing these international activities for strategic goals. In our global engagements, as in other campus-wide efforts, decentralized decision making inhibits strategic, institutional planning and action.

Thus, if global engagement is to become effectively integrated into all aspects of institutional cultures and inform all of the core values and missions, some degree of centralized coordination is both desirable and necessary. Management of institutional partnerships can be a key mechanism of such coordination.

Cultivating Strategic Relationships

US Research I universities typically maintain hundreds of active partnership agreements with institutions around the world. Most of these are highly focused partnerships resulting from the interests and activities of a particular faculty member, department, or research lab. They are often short-lived—withering as personnel, research interests, and funding opportunities shift; and typically their impact is limited to the specific academic or research unit that initiated the relationship. These focused agreements play an important role in any research university's portfolio of international engagements, but alone they contribute little toward strategic internationalization goals nor toward aligning global engagement with other institutional priorities.

Such a contribution is only possible when the institution, as a whole, intentionally identifies and cultivates international partnerships that are both broadly and deeply impactful—in other words, *strategic* international partnerships. As with any other prioritized institutional strategy, the identification and cultivation of such partnerships must arise from consultation and consensus among key constituents, but ultimately must be coordinated by some central administrative unit. They should be few in number and should reflect a long-term commitment of time, effort, and resources at the campus level to grow, nurture, and sustain the relationship.

Establishing the necessary infrastructure to effectively identify and cultivate strategic international partnerships is a crucial first step. Elements of such an infrastructure may include:

Information collection and management. Collecting data about existing and recent past institutional linkages, assessing approaches that have worked well, linkages sustained overtime, and why this is the case is often a significant challenge. Maintaining an accurate database of the wide variety of international engagements in a comprehensive research university is a widely acknowledged challenge, and various database platforms and approaches have been developed to address it. Whatever the approach, overcoming the challenge is crucial: Informed decisions on global engagement must draw on knowledge of current and past linkages.

Policy and oversight structures. In order to develop and implement an international partnership strategy that is effectively integrated into the institution's core values and missions, what must be in place is some sort of advisory body, with representation from the key sectors of the research, education, and engagement enterprises. Both this advisory body and the central administrative unit charged with implementing its recommendations must be empowered by policy to make decisions, represent the campus to partners, and assess the outcomes.

Explicit support from central leadership. The senior leadership of the institution—its chief executive officer, chief academic officer, senior research administrator, council of deans, etc.—as well as its governing board of trustees, should be integrally involved in developing international strategies and publicly supportive of emerging strategic international partnerships. This will contribute significantly to the integration of international engagement throughout the institutional culture. Rather than being viewed as a specialized, somewhat marginalized collection of activities (learning abroad, international student recruitment and services, and specific research collaborations), international engagement must be communicated as valuable to the whole institution and as a natural component of all core activities.

Resources. Strategic international partnerships tend to develop gradually and must be sustained over time. Some investment of resources, both human and financial, is crucial, particularly in the early stages of cultivation. Ideally, this investment will come from a variety of sources across the campus, reflecting the integral role of the partnership in the institutional culture. Coordination and oversight may belong with the central campus international offices, but individual colleges and research institutes, as well as key administrative units, should be equally invested in the success of the partnership.

With these tools in place, a balance between some degree of central coordination and strategic planning with decentralized, dynamic implementation becomes possible. The end goal is a small, highly select network of prioritized institutional relationships. These strategic partnerships should be distinguished by breadth and depth of impact, strong faculty support, demonstrable mutual benefit, and sustainability over time.

Faculty Support and Engagement

Significant faculty engagement in identifying, cultivating, sustaining, and evaluating strategic international partners is essential for maintaining a balance between centralized and decentralized investment in, and management of, the partnerships. Faculty must be engaged in both the broader planning and policy discussion and in support of specific strategic partnerships. At the planning and policy level, faculty governance leaders should be involved in the relevant advisory bodies. Faculty senates should not learn of major international engagement initiatives after the “deal has been cut,” and then asked to endorse them. Representation of the faculty senate on international advisory committees can help ensure faculty input at all stages of the ongoing conversation about the institution’s evolving international profile.

At the level of specific engagements, individual faculty advocates can play a key role in cultivating strong faculty support. For comprehensive research universities, at least two such advocates, from significantly different academic backgrounds, may be warranted for each strategic partnership. Enthusiastic faculty champions representing, for example, social sciences and humanities departments, as well as STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) disciplines or professional schools, can help broaden the partnerships to be truly institutional in scope and impact. These advocates should be actively engaged in collaborative activities with the partner institution; however, they should also have a “big picture” perspective and the ability to imagine and articulate the broader institutional goals of the partnership. They should be recognized for their service to the institution, in this capacity.

Evaluating Partnerships and Assessing Potential

In addition to the availability of effective faculty advocates, there are a number of other key criteria for distinguishing potential strategic international partnerships, from among the hundreds of focused institutional collaborations in an institution’s portfolio. These include:

Similar scope of activities. Potential partners should be relative peer institutions, similarly focused or comprehensive in their research and educational programs, with at least some shared—as well as complementary—strengths in particular disciplines.

Historical and existing connections. A survey of past interactions between potential strategic partners will often reveal surprisingly long, if sometimes sporadic, relationships.

Mutual interest and commitment. The central administrations of potential partners should be equally vested in developing a strategic partnership and willing to allocate relatively equal amounts of human and financial resources, to ensure the partnership’s success.

Compatible administrative structures. The international offices at the partner institutions must both be in a position to effectively advocate for the emerging strategic partnership.

Student interest. The study-abroad administrators at potential partner institutions should gauge the level of interest among their students in studying abroad at their particular locales.

Potential for consortial activities. Strong candidates for potential strategic partnerships will often share other institutional partners in common, providing a facilitated path for developing consortia of institutions, with shared collaborative activities.

Potential for thematic focus. In addition to considering the geographic distribution of a portfolio of strategic international partnerships, it may

be useful to focus particular strategic partnerships on specific themes. These themes should be multidisciplinary and inclusive enough to maintain a breadth of activities, but they can capture the attention of both students and faculty, who otherwise might not naturally seek to engage with the partner.

Conclusion

Potential benefits for a major US research university, from a strategic partnership approach, are significant. They include access to alternative external funding agencies and grant programs; economies of scale in study-abroad administration; more sophisticated curricular integration of cooperative education activities; access to unique research equipment, facilities, and environments; and enhanced economic development through leveraging of shared multinational corporate relations. Higher education has become a truly “global industry,” with increased competition for the best faculty, students, and external research support. Strategic international partnerships—which are effectively aligned with institutional strategic priorities and benefit faculty, students, and the civic and commercial societies served—have a critical place in the evolving role of Research I universities as global institutions of the 21st century.