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Developing US Partnerships: Perspectives from Abroad

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Establishing international partnerships with US higher education institutions can be a rewarding and positive experience from an institutional perspective, but it can also be challenging, time consuming, and at many times a frustrating and futile exercise. In fact, most of the official partnerships established between higher education institutions in the international arena, including those involving US colleges and universities, become mere expressions of good intentions, with limited tangible outcomes.

Historically, US higher education institutions have had a relatively easier time, compared with peers in other countries, positioning themselves to explore and establish international partnerships. Certainly, it helps that the United States is a country with a higher education system that is well-regarded internationally. The perception of “prestige” and “quality” plays an important role. However, as international education has become much more sophisticated and competitive on a global basis, no longer can US colleges and universities rely solely on such reputation factors when establishing partnerships. Today, US institutions must abandon the preconceived notions of superiority, which they often bring to conversations with potential international partners, and instead act more in a genuine partnership-building mode. This requires that they have more relevant information available about their institutional strengths and weaknesses, as matched with the ones from potential partners. Furthermore, they must also have at their disposal flexible tools and incentives for international collaboration, which in the past were not as necessary.

Shifting Terrain

The most recent global survey conducted by the International Association of Universities (IAU 2010) shows that, from a regional perspective, North America (including the United States and Canada) is no longer seen as the top priority for higher education institutions, when establishing partnerships abroad. Among institutions in the Middle East that participated in the IAU survey, North America is a second priority, while institutions in Asia and Latin America listed North America as their third-regional priority. For institutions in Europe and Africa, the North American region was not included among the top-three-priority regions. Meanwhile, countries such as China, India, and more recently Brazil have suddenly become more popular for the development of partnerships. Likewise, although the United States continues leading the world as the top attractor of international students, its global share has been reduced from 22.9 percent in 2000 to only 16.6 percent in 2010 (OECD 2012).

While institutions worldwide will certainly continue to pursue partnerships with US institutions as they internationalize, many will also look for collaborative avenues in other regions—along with, or in some cases, in lieu of US collaborations. Also, some countries have developed aggressive international outreach policies and programs aimed at raising the profile of their colleges and universities in international education. US higher education institutions seriously need to be aware of these developments.

Countering Myths and Stereotypes

Over the years, through the work done by the Consortium for North American Higher Education Collaboration (CONAHEC) in helping institutions to establish partnerships with peer institutions (what we refer to colloquially as a “dating service”), some identifiable communication missteps between potential partners and misconceptions about US higher education have been recurrent, at times compromising even the sincerest intentions for collaboration.

For example, the fact that US higher education is more than Harvard-type and research-type universities is not necessarily common knowledge around the world. Non-US institutions often have limited knowledge about the great diversity of the higher education system in the United States, especially as it relates to state colleges, teaching-oriented institutions, and two-year community colleges. US higher education institutions must work harder to make potential partners aware of the different types of institutions that exist in the United States and the specific advantages that the different actors may bring to the table.

The role of US college and university presidents is not always clear from the outside. Institutional leaders from abroad are at times not highly aware of the decentralized nature of the decision-making processes that exist in the majority of US higher education institutions. The assumption that meeting with presidents of US institutions and gaining their involvement is crucial for the success of a partnership diminishes the sometimes greater importance of connecting with faculty members and decision makers at the department level. When connecting with institutions abroad, it is always useful to familiarize partners with the organizational structure and decision-making processes within US institutions.

It is also frequently surprising to international partners that US higher education is characterized by many “rich but poor” institutions. Often, institutional representatives from abroad are puzzled when they realize that US institutions may have large budgets, but limited flexibility in contributing resources to international partnerships. Without proper clarification, this may lead to a misperception that a limited financial commitment implies limited interest on the US side.

The question of whether collaboration precedes formal agreements or vice versa may also be a sticking point. Institutions from abroad interested in developing partnerships with US institutions are always eager, and almost always ready, to sign a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) or its equivalent. When they learn of colleges and universities in the United States which prefer to foster first some contact and collaboration among faculty members, and later to formalize it by signing an MOU, this situation may lead to frustration and even a perceived lack of interest.

Another concern is that international partners may perceive an egocentric approach on the US side. In negotiating partnerships, institutions from abroad often find it difficult to understand legal regulations defined in US institutions, which, not being properly clarified, tend to alienate and even offend peer institutions. A typical problem seen is one in which a US institution states that a potential conflict arising from the MOU should be resolved only in the United States in accordance with the legal system of the state in which the US institution is located (instead of an approach using a third-party conflict resolution process); that the institution abroad should demonstrate that it does not do business with “rogue” countries; or that the only valid version of the MOU is the one written and signed in English. Though the reasons behind these regulations may be legitimate, proper early communication and clarification, as well as more flexibility and a thoughtful, diplomatic touch, are always recommended.

Finally, reference by US institutional leaders to the US higher education system as the “best in the world” may hit a sour note with potential partners overseas. Even though this statement could be supported with data or research, not everyone agrees with it, and moreover, not everyone likes to hear it. A more humble attitude toward the system and its institutions is always helpful in developing trust with peer institutions.

A Foundation of Trust and More

Of course, there is no single, simplistic formula that can be applied in establishing successful partnerships with institutions abroad. Nevertheless, it is useful to take into consideration some of the following recommendations.

International engagement should be linked with institutional priorities. Institutions cannot collaborate in every place and with everyone abroad. Being strategic in defining subject and regional priority areas, in which institutions are interested, helps them become more assertive and efficient when establishing international partnerships. Also, it is crucial to establish partnerships, based on mutual respect and mutual understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of both institutions involved. Ultimately, the creation of trust is the most important foundation of a successful and longstanding collaboration.

Being respectful of quality-assurance mechanisms existing in other countries and institutions is another key ingredient. Rather than “better” or “worse,” it is vital to understand that institutions are often just different. This makes it critical to be clear but sensitive on matters related to financial, legal, and logistical considerations associated with the development of partnerships, respectful of codes of communication, mindful of different time lines, and open to recognizing that each country/institution has its own legal regulatory system. Utilizing support organizations familiar with institutions and organizational cultures abroad can be an excellent strategy for building a knowledge base in this area.

Ultimately, much can be gained from learning to ask questions and listen, fundamentally valuing and celebrating diversity as part of a partnership, and being patient. It takes time to build a partnership, but strong international partnerships are worth the effort.

References

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