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International Research Partners: The Challenges of Developing an Equitable Partnership between Universities in the Global North and South

Abstract

This paper, which builds upon research linked to the development of sustainable study abroad programs in emerging nations, focuses on key challenges to true partnerships between emerging and established universities. It begins with an analysis of challenges which may occur when attempting to develop an equitable partnership based on joint grants and/or research projects. It also includes a discussion of struggles experienced by academic staff who desire a more equitable relationship that will enhance the missions of both institutions. The paper will then analyze one particular partnership between two universities (the University of Central Florida, USA, and the University of Botswana) during study abroad programs funded by the Fulbright-Hays Groups Project Abroad (2011) and the U.S. State Department (2012-2015). An analysis of this partnership is particularly relevant as it focuses on the initial steps, dialogues, perspectives and actions of both institutions as they worked through a host of preconceived notions on neocolonialism and the challenges of successfully operating by another's "rules of engagement" within a dynamic geopolitical platform.

Keywords: collaborative research partnerships, study abroad programs, emerging nations

Introduction

As the process of globalization expands, collaborative relationships between institutions of higher learning worldwide cannot be ignored. Moreover, the goals of globalization and international partnerships can be valuable to home and host institutions alike. In most instances, the development of international partnerships are motivated by institutions in the Global North and South to advance their academic interests and goals, and thus seek to develop the strongest, and most advantageous strategic alliances that support both globalization and the commodification of education (Nuffic, 2008).

To this end, equitable and effective collaborative partnerships may be the best means to enhance quality research while improving educational standards across the Global North-South divide. Moreover, equitable and collaborative research programs enhance both the academic outputs and visibility of partners in the Global South, while building the capacity of the Global North to conduct relevant research in emerging nations (Gaillard, 1994). Moreover, as Angeles and Gurstein (2000) observe, while there are daunting pressures and demands on economies in the Global North, these pressures and demands are more extreme in the Global South due to deepening poverty, decay of public institutions, and less than efficient governance. These challenges make Global North-South relations both fragile and complex.

This paper, which focuses on key challenges to true partnerships between universities in the Global North and South, applies these theoretical notions to actual field research on the development of sustainable study abroad programs in emerging

nations for pre-service education students. The paper begins with an analysis of challenges frequently experienced by universities from the Global North and South when attempting to develop an equitable partnership based on joint grants and/or research projects, including the struggles experienced by faculty at both universities who desire a more equitable relationship that will enhance the missions of both institutions. Following this theoretical analysis, the paper focuses on one particular partnership between two universities from the Global North and South (The University of Central Florida, USA, and the University of Botswana) during study abroad programs spanning five years and funded by the U.S. State Department (2012-2015) and the Fulbright-Hays Groups Project Abroad (2011).

Issues linked to equitable partnerships between institutions in the Global North and South

Unfortunately, even when universities from the Global North and South are cognizant of the challenges embedded within partnerships, the path to developing a sustainable, quality programs, grants and the like that have the capacity to positively impact both partner universities is often obstructed by varying expectations and miscommunications. The socio-economic disparity of universities obviously exacerbates these challenges. In order to overcome these challenges, Wohlgemuth and Olsson (2003) advise that dialogue, rather than domination, be promoted among the partners, and that such an approach encourage the development of shared values. Moreover, while “capacity building” is often touted as a key outcome of international partnerships, the “power relationships (based on inequitable wealth) may become a significant barrier to communication and immersion”, and may inhibit positive outcomes normally expected of study abroad programs (Woolf, 2006, p. 142).

A partnership between the University of Central Florida (UCF) and the University of Botswana (UB): A “One-Way” Study Abroad Program?

To further examine these theoretical notions about the development of equitable partnerships between institutions in the Global North and South, this paper now shifts its focus towards one particular partnership between an institution in the Global North, (UCF) and an institution in the Global South, (UB).

Modes of Inquiry/Data Sources

This study is based on a comprehensive and extended review of pertinent literature focused on the development of equitable partnerships between institutions in the developed and emerging worlds, and an analysis of the sustained partnership between UCF and UB, based on shared experiences within a 2011 Fulbright-Hays Group Projects Abroad in Botswana and a three-year U.S. Department of State Grant, *Capacity Building Program for U.S. Undergraduate Study Abroad*, awarded to UCF and UB in August 2012 and continuing through 2015.

Addressing the challenge of over-committed faculty from the Global South

Given the usually high faculty/student ratios in many emerging universities, this can negatively impact the quality of programs and instruction. Moreover, even when study abroad programs occur during vacation periods, host institution faculty often come to the challenging realization that they have insufficient time left to devote to career advancement activities which include research, publications, and grant proposal writing. Fortunately, these challenges can be mediated in two ways. First, whenever possible, study abroad programs should be scheduled during a host university's long vacation periods. Second, these programs should offer meaningful opportunities for both home and host institution faculty to engage in collaborative research and publication activities. For example, the 2011, 2013, 2014 and 2015 projects in Botswana were scheduled during May, June and/or July, months when most UB students were on vacation. Moreover, faculty from both partnership institutions successfully engaged in numerous scholarly activities, resulting in joint conference paper presentations by Biraimah & Jotia at CIES (2012-2014), SACHES (2014), SAERA (2015) and ISCS (2013) and a recently published paper in the *Journal of Studies in International Education* (Biraimah & Jotia, 2013).

Challenges to establishing an equitable and collaborative partnership

Beyond the above logistical impediments, however, remain numerous challenges to establishing a truly collegial, collaborative and reciprocal partnership between institutions in the Global North and South. And while multiple grants and study abroad projects such as those in Botswana provide enticing possibilities for "capacity building" (as defined from a Global Northern perspective), the final impact may vary from original expectations due to a plethora of issues linked to the "human condition".

Challenges to building a consensus document

While grant *Requests for Proposals* (RFPs) may appear to provide clear direction and definition, proposal development and program implementation can produce an alternate reality. Due to heavy teaching and service loads, and a perceived lack of project ownership, faculty from the Global South may not identify initial proposal development as a key responsibility, as do their colleagues from the Global North. For example, the UB faculty team did not engage in systematic critical editing of a grant narrative linked to proposed study abroad programs (2012-2015), though they did provide succinct edits related to a description of their institution. Moreover, voiced disappointments regarding the lack of reciprocity once the proposal was funded suggested that the UB team had envisioned a program which varied significantly from the final proposal, which strictly observed RFP guidelines.

Perspectives on timeliness and detailed planning

While a neutral middle-ground with regard to priorities and timeliness would have facilitated planning, this was perhaps an unattainable goal given the differing perspectives on what constituted prioritized issues and appropriate time lines. And

even though many faculty members from emerging universities have extensive experiences in, and often terminal degrees from institutions in the Global North, their American counterparts should not assume that faculty teams from the Global North and South necessarily share identical values and perspectives.

Unfortunately, this difference in acceptable levels of detailed planning persisted throughout the grant, and continued to cause misunderstandings and angst on both sides of the Atlantic. For example, logistical issues surrounding the development of plans for extended immersion experiences in rural communities continued to demonstrate the divergent perceptions and expectations of faculty from UCF and UB. During initial planning sessions held at UB in October 2012, it was agreed that students and faculty would be divided between two rural schools. However, UB expanded these two sites to three, without consultation with their American colleagues. The UCF team found out about this change through a brief email listing the names of three schools. When UCF's project manager pressed her UB counterparts for the schools' locations, she was informed that a school's name was also the community's name (which turned out to be perfectly true, though UCF's search engines could not locate two of the three communities). Pleas for additional information regarding the size of the communities and their capacity to house participants in homestays and/or public lodging (key data that would drive a final budget), remained unanswered well into the new year. Clearly, until all locations were identified, it would be impossible to develop a final budget – which in turn would dictate the length of the final study abroad program, itineraries, and international airline reservations. Unfortunately, the high level of angst felt by UCF team members may have occurred through misperceptions regarding acceptable patterns of communications.

In retrospect, the UB team perceived their UCF partners as demanding information “at the speed of thunder” (UB's terminology), without taking into account the communication problems that existed with the three remote localities; especially at the primary school sites. Search engine technology, so easily accessible in the Global North, was not as effective in Botswana's marginalized rural communities. Moreover, key logistical information often required UB faculty members to undertake extended travel on rough gravel roads while their UCF counterparts waited impatiently for their phone calls to be returned.

Financial hurdles

US Government grants and perceived status differentiation

Though universities in the Global South may receive a share of the budget, U.S. federal grant requirements usually stipulate that an American institution “will control” the budget, clearly leaving their “partners” in dependent roles. In this case, UB was included in the development of grant narratives and budgets, but UCF remained the “lead institution”. Moreover, as substantial amounts of funding came directly from participant fees, financial control fell even more solidly into UCF's hands. While UB was allocated funds through a mutually agreed upon sub-contract (covering local expenses such as dormitories, guides, and faculty honorariums), the reimbursable nature of this grant precluded UB from managing substantial portions of the grant's budget (and from the benefits of lucrative overhead revenues). For

example, the grant from the U.S. State Department was initially designed for most expenditures, except international airfares, to occur within Botswana. Yet UB's sub-contract accounted for only 11% of total federal funds, as a lack of sufficient cash reserves kept them from a greater share of the grant's 26% overhead rate, a significant revenue which will now go to UCF. The old adage, "it takes money to make money" appears to apply in this instance.

Dueling accountants

Even when grant funds have been allocated in an equitable manner, other factors may keep "partner" universities on unequal terms, or mired in complex and competing accounting procedures. In most cases, universities from both the Global North and South have well established, yet often very different accounting and auditing procedures, and are rarely allowed by their institutions to deviate from these established guidelines. For example, there were often significant differences regarding what constituted sufficient "due diligence" with regard to receipts, currency conversions and auditors' expectations. And these varied accounting procedures easily translated into thousands of U.S. dollars (or Botswana Pula) gained or lost by the respective institutions. For example, the designation of exchange rates, as well as the official day for the exchange rate to be calculated, significantly impacted the budget's "bottom line" by several thousand U.S. dollars.

It should be noted that these accounting challenges led to a substantial delay before UB finally received funds from UCF, as designated in their mutually agreed upon sub-contract. For example, though UCF students departed Botswana in early June, it was not until mid-September of that same year that funds were finally received by UB, a full three months "after the fact", (a delay involving endless email exchanges, invoicing, disagreements on exchange rates and inaccurate banking information). Given the fact that host institutions in the Global South often have limited resources, such delays and frustrations may place these institutions in a dire financial position. Bradley (2008) contends that asymmetrical relationships between Global North-South partners are key obstacles to productive and collaborative research, and that this asymmetry manifests itself in terms of inequitable access to information, training, funding, conferences, publishing opportunities, and the disproportionate influence of Global Northern partners in project administration, budget management, and the development of research agendas (p. 27).

Concluding comments

Clearly, to develop equitable and productive relationships that endure, this study underscores the need to operationalize the most effective approaches to identify and analyze key opportunities, challenges and dilemmas directly linked to quality partnerships which include programs based in emerging nations. To develop a workable consensus and long-term commitments between institutions and communities, as well as enhancing a program's end products, there is a critical need for all partners to maintain continuous formal institutional reviews that include all stakeholders. Moreover, Global North-South collaborative partnerships could also be enhanced by designing programs that are not only more beneficial to the host institutions and communities, but include them as meaningful stakeholders; thus

providing an effective platform for transformative-learning experiences for all involved.

In conclusion, there must be transparent and mutually agreed upon “terms of engagement” regarding the development, management and evaluation of project proposals, budgets, and Memorandums of Understanding (MOU). This will (hopefully) avoid situations where institutions from the Global South are cast in dependent roles, while their partners from the Global North maintain control of most, if not all of the project funds. Such apparent (if not real) inequities compromise the goal of mutual capacity building, a key element in Global North-South collaborative partnerships. Clearly, the goal of developing and enriching human resources, while providing opportunities to reap the rewards of a strong, equitable, and truly collaborative partnership, cannot be compromised by perceived (or real) inequitable relationships. Moreover, if we are to conceptualize and operationalize a form of globalization capable of enriching all stakeholders worldwide, it is imperative that we begin by reaffirming partnerships between the Global North and South that are truly equitable and collaborative, while recognizing the unique and invaluable qualities and strengths of all stakeholders.

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