DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 478 775 HE 036 064

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TITLE	International Collaboration in Higher Education: An Overview of Critical Issues.
PUB DATE	2003-06-00
NOTE	13p.; Paper presented at the Virtual Educa Conference (Miami, FL, June 18-20, 2003).
PUB TYPE	Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Colleges; Foreign Countries; *Higher Education; *International Cooperation; *Program Implementation

ABSTRACT

This paper provides an overview of the challenges that impede success in collaboration among U.S. institutions of higher education and foreign institutions. There are problems in many areas, including administrative aspects, regulatory environment, the fiscal situation, and cultural and political factors. In crafting a response strategy, some things are highlighted, including: (1) developing staff expertise; (2) structural preparedness; (3) addressing the economic inequality between nations; and (4) expanding commitments to globalization. Programs that work well are based on prior experience with the type of program envisioned and fall within the normal and regular range of activities of the institution. Decision-making responsibilities are apportioned correctly, and there are incentives for motivation. Time is allowed to address the logistics, and the program is simple enough to be explained. Both parties have an exit strategy. The program requires "consumers" in that it addresses a need. Incremental improvements are planned for, and there is trust among participants. In planning international collaboration between institutions of higher education, a prior awareness of possible areas of difficulty can alert participants to possible problems. (SLD)

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International Collaboration in Higher Education: An Overview of Critical Issues

Virtual Educa 2003
Miami Convention Center, Miami, FL.
June 18-20, 2003

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Introduction

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A Typology of Problem Areas

Administrative. There may be an absence of knowledge of what conducting international programs actually entails. The typical campus already admits students from abroad and has reliable procedures to accomplish this. Scholar exchanges have also become relatively routine. Programs that differ from these two major formats must be created *de novo.* Basic issues to resolve include who will staff and be directly responsible for these operations at the cooperating institutions? How is the new program to be prioritized? Is the President the program "champion" or will it be someone else with far fewer institutional resources at his or her disposal? It is axiomatic in matters of university administration that good ideas are a "dime a dozen" and it is far more difficult to bring one to life than to simply conceive of it. Additionally, there is always more to any problem than initially meets the eye and one must be prepared, especially in the case of brand new offerings, for copious amounts of troubleshooting.

Regulatory environment. Does the college's charter permit it to become engaged in international programs? Is there a difference if the program is credit or non-credit? If it is a state or public institution, can resources (human and/or fiscal) be allocated to this purpose? If a private institution, must these initiatives be approved by the Board of Trustees? Some institutions may not provide additional resources and also discourage internal re-allocation of funds in support of international initiatives. The regulatory environment of the host country also comes into play in the sense that foreign institutions may be viewed as unwelcome competitors and be discouraged. They may not be allowed to open offices, their degrees and credits might not be recognized, or there might be impediments to hiring local faculty.

Fiscal. Significant tuition differentials are the most obvious barrier to inter-institutional cooperation, one notable example being the high cost of attending college in North America. It has been my own experience that this can be an insurmountable stumbling block when dealing with institutions located in other countries and regions who wish to send their students to the USA. The high cost of room and board and compulsory health insurance for foreign students can raise the economic bar still higher. Private institutions have the flexibility to adjust their tuition while the publics as a rule cannot. This explains why the former are more agile and entrepreneurial in developing international partnerships. Successful exchange programs like the government funded Fulbright which can overcome economic inequality are rarities. There may be comparable, but likewise limited, programs within the European Economic Community or other regional political blocs. The declining state support for public higher education in the USA over the past decade makes it less likely that these institutions will expend funds for programs that are not central to fulfilling their core mission.

Cultural and Political. Despite the extensive publicity given to the importance of globalization and the popularity of the internet which literally puts the world at everyone's (at least if they have access to a computer, modem, and international telephone service) fingertips, cultural barriers to partnering abound. Beyond language barriers for non-native speakers, differences in the larger social, economic, and political environments are far from modest impediments. For example, in the wake of the New York City September 11 World Trade Center tragedy, some foreign students residing in the USA expressed uneasiness and a desire to return home. The same was true of Americans studying abroad The war in Iraq, and the current SARS epidemic impact upon any country's willingness to accept foreign students and even faculty, for that matter. Recently the University of California, Berkeley announced measures that would limit the enrollment of Asian students who may potentially be carriers of the SARS disease. Visas and access to travel opportunities are also adversely affected by changes in the world's political climate. I recently returned from an international conference in the USA where it was stated that many foreign delegates were unable to attend due to visa restrictions. Although the severity of the problem may have been overstated, the perception of difficulties will certainly influence this and other similar gatherings.

Crafting a Response Strategy

Developing staff expertise. The most important element in creating a campus infrastructure appropriate to the development and administration of international programs is the necessary investment in human capital that can initiate and deploy these programs. Successful programs can rely upon talented and motivated staff that are a repository of expert knowledge and institutional memory. A commitment must be made to academic and administrative colleagues working with international programs that their investment of effort will contribute to their career advancement and not be a *cul de sac* of frustration and insufficient support. My own experience is that at many universities, international programs are minimally staffed and nurtured.

Structural preparedness. The prior groundwork must be done by senior administrators to ensure that the college is legally permitted to engage in international programs. This could entail action by the Board of Trustees, the state legislature, or other appropriate governing authority. It may also require the empowering of a specific campus bureau, school, or division with the charge of developing these programs as a way of addressing university traditions of decentralization. A change in mission can never be accomplished simply by edict from the top; it requires buy-in and commitment throughout the organization.

Addressing economic inequality between nations. Even if a college can lower its tuition, this may still be insufficient to attract foreign students. Creative thinking to establish new agencies such as an "international tuition bank" are needed so that families of foreign students can finance these tuition bills. The burgeoning proprietary higher education sector may be the best suited to come up with the appropriate solutions since these schools are less encumbered by traditions and also far less burdened with expensive overhead. The recent expansion of North American proprietary schools such as Sylvan and DeVry indicate that the international environment seems promising from a business perspective provided these companies can truly operate in this fluid environment.

Expanding commitments to globalization. For other than proprietary institutions which are profit-making entities, motivation for the vast majority of colleges and universities, be they public or private, remains a commitment to the ideals of internationalism, a tradition deeply rooted in the history of higher education. While it may be that the enlargement of e-learning can provide a new form of international educational exchange, this can hardly supplant the experiences gained by teaching and learning in other cultural environments. In fact, it may be that the relative ease of internet education will whet appetites for the actual experiences. In that event, institutions must be prepared to deliver what their publics demand.

When Programs Work

In reviewing the preceding pages I realize that I have not yet focused on successful programs, describing in like manner some principles that can account for viability. Here, then, are some observations.

Prior experience with the type of program envisioned. At least one of the parties has extensive prior experience in collaboratively conducting the type of program under discussion. They already have the staff, resources, and fine grained knowledge required. The program has been conducted before, but with different partners.

Program is within the normal and regular range of activities. The program under development is within the general activity scope of the parties. That is, even if the program has not been conducted internationally, it is a program that would normally be conducted by both parties domestically.

Decision-making responsibilities. The locus of decision-making for both parties lies directly within each respective unit conducting the negotiations and program planning. Each party can safely presume that between them they have the authority for "go" or "no-go."

Incentives. There are adequate incentives, financial and/or otherwise, to motivate both of the parties. This ensures that each exerts the maximum effort required for a successful program.

Logistics. There is enough lead time to adequately plan, schedule, enroll students, and address unanticipated issues. A year is probably the minimum with at least one on-site visit during the planning stages.

Simplicity. The program can be easily explained, and is transparent, with as few components as need. There are no superfluous "bells and whistles."

Exit strategy. Both parties have reviewed a range of scenarios that might lead to program cancellation, postponement, or rescheduling. Each understands the needs of the other and recognizes that a successful partnership may be unattainable despite careful planning and execution.

There is a consumer. The program addresses an educational need already experienced by a sufficient number of potential participants. Moreover, this population can be reached through cost-effective marketing strategies. Ideally, the potential student belongs to a group that both parties currently serve so there is an understanding of their educational requirements and how these can best be addressed.

Incremental improvements in program quality. The proposed program represents an improved iteration on a prior successful program. Both experience and resources are re-invested so as to improve the current offering.

There is trust. Both parties respect and trust each other. Although there may be a formal "letter of agreement" that contractually sets out program details, rights and responsibilities, the partners have demonstrated to each other sufficient trust and integrity for each to invest resources and are prepared to take sensible risks on behalf of the new venture.

The above factors could be thought of as a type of check-list, however I hesitate to recommend this since so much subjectivity, guesswork, and even leaps of faith enter into these judgments. Moreover, in truth do we ever really understand why we succeed or fail?

Conclusion

Very often in our enthusiasm to work with foreign institutions we overlook or minimize the very real challenges that can impede success. Although I believe it is counterproductive to extensively dwell on obstacles, a prior awareness of possible areas of difficulty can alert both collaborating parties to likely rough patches ahead. This can accelerate the development of solutions and lead to the fulfillment of initial expectations.

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