Forging International University Partnerships: One Approach

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Abstract

In a previous article (Etling & McGirr, 2005) the authors identified and discussed a number of issues with partnerships between U.S. universities and institutions in other countries. These partnerships have often been problematic. The purpose of this article, a model-building case study, is to describe one approach to forming such partnerships. This approach consists of a process that grew out of the conclusions in that previous article. Those conclusions were combined with 1) a review of literature on partnerships and coalitions and 2) opinions of a panel of experts. Experts were questioned by e-mail to determine key questions and issues that should be addressed during partnership formation. From the three sources, guidelines for building partnerships were developed, organized into a Partnership Exploration Instrument, and then tested with six different institutions in five different countries.

Keywords: Partnership, University Collaboration, Project Development, Memorandum of Understanding, Collaborative Planning, Development
Introduction

U.S. universities are often approached by institutions in other countries to form partnerships. The current world system of globalization encourages partnership at many levels (Bryant, 2003) and some grants require partnerships. Attempts to forge partnerships, however, often fail. Currently many universities employ the memorandum of understanding (MOU) to develop partnership. Because the MOU uses a standard format to address a few legal issues, it has limited flexibility as an effective approach to forging partnerships. While implementing the MOU, university representatives often employ a trial-and-error approach that ignores key steps or issues in a particular process for building partnership. The result is often a weak or unfocused partnership.

In a previous article (see pages 15-21 of this issue), the authors described their thoughts about partnerships based on their own experiences over a thirty-five year period. They described the characteristics of an effective partnership and provided suggestions for forming one. One of their recommendations was that their guidelines be expanded and organized into an instrument that could be used by others who wish to forge partnerships with institutions overseas. They suggested that the steps for Participatory Rural Appraisal be used as a format for the instrument.

The purpose of this article, a model-building case study, is to describe how that instrument was constructed and tested. This Partnership Exploration Instrument was developed using the conclusions and suggestions from the previous article, a review of literature on partnerships and coalitions, and the opinions of a panel of 20 experts. Experts were questioned by e-mail, using a modified Delphi questionnaire, to determine key questions and issues that should be addressed during partnership formation. The resulting instrument was then tested with six different institutions in five different countries that happened to be pursuing partnerships with the University of Nebraska, Lincoln. It provides one approach for forging institutional partnerships for international projects.

Review of Literature

While there is limited literature that addresses the mechanics of forming partnerships between universities in different countries, other sources on business partnerships, academic partnerships and inter-organizational coordination are pertinent.

Mulford and Klonglan’s (1979) work on inter-organizational coordination comes from their experience with extension community development programs at Iowa State University. Their extension publication is an excellent resource to begin to understand some of the issues of partnerships between local community organizations. They discuss “degrees of coordination” ranging from a) informal and infrequent contacts between individuals to z) merger (the two organizations become one). They also discuss a simple process for implementing coordinated programs. This process provides a general guide for developing a partnership.

Although Weisbord (1992) does not directly deal with partnerships between organizations, he does address the process of bringing together key stakeholders to discover common ground. One chapter on building collaborative communities (pp. 35-44) provides ideas about the process of developing partnerships. This is a business book about the planning process. While an excellent source on group process, this text does not deal with many important issues in building partnerships.

Beyerlein, Freedman, McGee and Moran (2003) focus on organizational development with most of their examples coming from business. They do include a chapter on service organizations and one on “collaborations in virtual settings.” Their book is organized around “ten principles of collaborative organizations” that include
seven principles relevant to universities or international organizations: 1) focus on business results; 2) enforce a few strict rules; 3) exploit the rhythm of convergence and divergence; 4) improve communication; 5) foster personal accountability; 6) treat collaboration as a disciplined process; and 7) promote flexibility. They provide a “collaboration diagnostic tool” (checklist) that, with some adaptation to the university setting, could be useful to evaluate partnerships.

Austin (2000) also provides an excellent resource on partnerships. He writes primarily for “nonprofit and business leaders who are seeking ways to partner effectively…” (p. xi). He discusses many types of alliances, many not relevant to universities, and provides brief case studies. Chapter Two describes possible stages of the evolution of a partnership. Chapter Five discusses evaluation of partnerships. Chapter Eight presents guidelines and key questions for organizing partnerships. He also emphasizes the importance of carefully selecting a partner before beginning serious discussions about the partnership.

Bryant (2003) focuses on business partnerships. He uses drama as a metaphor for the partnership development process and he acknowledges globalization as the context in which partnerships are formed. He discusses six “dilemmas” in forming partnerships: threat, persuasion, rejection, positioning, cooperation and trust. Certainly each of these dilemmas is an important issue. Bryant’s focus on the business sector, however, and his propensity to coin new terms, or to give new meanings to well-known terms, tends to be confusing and requires considerable interpretation so that his fascinating insights can be applied to the university setting.

Faulkner (1995), a management consultant, emphasizes “strategic alliances.” He addresses such key issues as: 1) which type of alliance to use; 2) how to choose partners; 3) how to set up a strategic alliance; and 4) how to manage the alliance. Although he focuses on business and industry in his examples and case studies, many of his points can be translated to the university setting.

The Global Development Alliance Secretariat (2002) of USAID has published a “how-to guide” for alliance builders related to international development projects. The guide deals with many practical issues of building alliances between USAID and its public and private partners. It describes the attributes of a good alliance, how alliances are formed, the pitfalls of such alliances, how they can be managed, what constitutes success and how the alliance relates to USAID’s normal legal, procurement and management systems. While a useful resource, the disadvantages of this guide, at least to universities that want to form partnerships, are that everything is focused on USAID, and it is primarily based on a business model. A balanced partnership between two universities is not even discussed.

Other governmental and non-governmental organizations are also concerned with partnership development. Like USAID, however, they tend to focus on their own organizational missions and structures. They are not particularly helpful in guiding a U.S. university to develop a partnership with institutions in other countries where the partnership is based on collaboration among equals in a non-profit context.

A number of internet web sites deal with educational partnerships. The most useful appear to be: 1) Colleges and Universities Partnering for International Development, 2) Educational Partnerships Case Studies, and 3) Global Education Partnership. The first site provides a listing of U.S. universities seeking international partners. The last two sites mostly provide case studies of primary and secondary school partnerships. While these case studies do not describe how to form partnerships, they provide examples of successful partnerships.
These sources suggest some guidelines to guide the process of forging partnerships. They support the conclusions of the previous article that identifies characteristics of productive partnerships, pitfalls, cross-cultural concerns, and issues of evaluation.

**Procedure**

While this review of literature was underway, a panel of experts (20 international programs directors in colleges of agriculture at land-grant universities selected because of their participation in discussions on partnerships through the International Agriculture Section of the National Association of State Universities and Land Grant Colleges) was surveyed. Information from the experts was collected using a modified Delphi questionnaire conducted via the internet in two rounds. In round one the experts were asked, “What questions would you ask a representative of another institution that proposed a formal partnership with your institution?” In round two the answers from round one were combined with items suggested by the review of literature and from the authors’ suggestions from the previous article. These items fit nicely into the pattern of responses from the experts during round one of the survey. The combined list of items was then submitted to the experts for them to agree, amend, and return. A third round of the Delphi process was not needed because of the consensus of agreement among the experts in their responses during round two. These responses formed a set of guidelines that were organized according to the steps of the participatory rural assessment methodology (World Resources Institute, n. d.). See Table 1 for the set of guidelines.

The instrument was then field tested with six educational institutions in five countries: 1) Establishment National d’Enseignement Superior Agronomy en Dijon (ENESAD), a French university in Dijon; 2) Inter-American Institute for Cooperation on Agriculture (IICA), an educational support organization located in Costa Rica, initiated by the Organization of American States, and funded largely by the World Bank and Latin American countries, that assists ministries of education and agriculture in member countries; 3) the University of Colima (Mexico); 4) the Tibetan Agricultural and Animal Husbandry College; and 6) the University of Tibet. Testing involved using the instrument to guide face-to-face discussions between representatives of the partner institutions so that they could develop plans for collaboration on specific projects. After the field testing, minor refinements were made and the final Partnership Exploration Instrument resulted (Table 1).

**An Instrument to Guide the Partnering Process**

Table 1 presents the complete Partnership Exploration Instrument. It describes important steps and key questions to guide partnership discussions between representatives of institutions and organizations in different countries.
# Table 1

**Partnership Exploration Instrument**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Part A: Steps</th>
<th>Key Questions/Processes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Purpose:</td>
<td>To explore the possibility for new or expanded partnership between our two institutions.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Preliminaries:</td>
<td>Given the schedule, how should our time be used?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Who should be involved in these discussions (include at least two persons from each institution)?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Background. What is the current situation (climate) at the two universities that encourages or discourages partnership?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Clarify values – What institutional values will help or hinder partnership? See sample values section (Part B) below.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Do we agree on ground rules for working together? See sample ground rules (Part B) below.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Organizational chart(s).</td>
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<td></td>
<td>What are our strongest academic programs? What are yours?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Other graduate, undergraduate and non-degree programs of interest.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>How will we each bear the burden for funding? What external grants should be pursued?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>What other information would you like to receive from our institution?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>How do we go about assembling needed information? What are the next steps?</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Analyze:</td>
<td>Analyze and synthesize data.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Collect more data if needed.</td>
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<td>5. Rank:</td>
<td>Rank strengths, needs and opportunities.</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. Write a Plan:</td>
<td>A plan that tells 1) <strong>who</strong>, 2) <strong>does what</strong>, 3) <strong>when</strong>, so that priorities are addressed.</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. Implement the Plan:</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>8. Evaluate:</td>
<td>How will we evaluate our partnership?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Who will be responsible for evaluation?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>How will evaluation results be shared?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Values: (Example from one U.S. university)</td>
<td>Key Questions/Processes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>• We attempt to balance our program emphasis among faculty, students and residents of the state while linking with partners outside our state and the United States.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• We emphasize partnership over development; partnership requires teamwork.</td>
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<td>• We value creativity over money; we value integrity over competitive advantage.</td>
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<td>• Our ethical principles will include universal values embraced by the major religions and by humanistic philosophies.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• We will not try to be all things to all people everywhere all of the time.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• We will not accept funds that do not fit our program priorities and partners’ needs.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Moderation is preferred over excess.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• We will emphasize innovation over duplication; we will seek new methodologies for program planning, implementation and evaluation, rather than relying on methods that are no longer consistent with our values and ethical principles.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• We will question everything and invite partners to do the same.</td>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ground Rules for Developing Partnerships:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• We must respect each other’s differences, strengths and needs.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• We must clarify internal (within the institution) conditions and external conditions that affect our respective strengths and needs.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• We must be open, transparent, throughout this process.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• We must maintain confidentiality of information shared through this process to prevent any penalty to a partner for openness and transparency.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• We must agree that partnerships are complex and tenuous – much effort is required to create them and much effort is required to maintain them.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• We need to explore opportunities and impediments to partnerships in depth while avoiding unnecessary complexity.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Table 1 (continued)

Part C: Questions and suggestions for later meetings (or correspondence):

- Have previous contacts been positive? Any negatives?
- Do any formal agreements exist? Is a formal agreement required?
- Do they need to be updated? Do both sides have copies?
- Do we know how many of our (and their) undergraduate and graduate students plan to study outside the country? Can we find out? How?
- What other partners (especially other U.S. land-grant universities and consortia) do you have already? What have you learned from these partnerships?
- How many levels of bureaucracy have to be involved in decisions about the partnership?
- Share any documentation (including existing reports, articles, and brochures) that will make the data collection simpler or faster.

Collecting New Information:

- Follow the agenda/schedule with representatives from both sides of the partnership involved in each phase of data collection.
- Maintain flexibility (be prepared to add questions or skip questions as necessary).
- How many students are enrolled? How many faculty members are employed?
- What facilities exist to house students and faculty? What medical facilities are available?
- What are entrance requirements for students from the other institution? Is language fluency required? Is there appropriate instruction offered for the required language?
- How reliable is communication, fax, e-mail, internet?
- How are visitors from the partner’s country viewed by locals? Are there political or social problems for visitors from particular countries?
- How do the research, teaching and outreach efforts of each university complement and enhance the research, teaching and outreach efforts of the other university?
- How do our needs match with your strengths and vice versa?
- Where is the common interest? Should we share more information on our stronger programs that correspond to common interests?
- Should we expand our focus at this point or move to the next step (narrow the focus)?

Analyzing and Synthesizing Data:

- Who will analyze and synthesize data collected? How will this be done?
- When will information be shared with other partners?
- How can we be certain we have identified all strengths and needs of each university?
Table 1 (continued)

### Part C: Questions and suggestions for later meetings (or correspondence):

#### Rank Strengths, Needs and Opportunities:

- Rank Strengths (in terms of their importance to the partnership).
- Rank Needs (in terms of their importance to the partnership).
- Rank Opportunities for the partnership.
- What can we do better together than apart?
- For what grants might we be more competitive as a partnership than individually?
- How can we benefit from each other’s resources?
- Who on my campus is likely to want to participate?

#### Plan: (should be revisited as conditions change).

- Both universities should have current copies of the partnership plan so that it can be shared, at any time, with individuals internal or external to the universities.
- What is the purpose of the partnership as determined by previous steps?
- What are specific objectives of the partnership?
- What will be the outcomes of the partnership? Impacts?
- How will this plan be financed? What funds are available?
- How will responsibilities for expenses be balanced?

#### Implement:

- Follow the plan, maintaining flexibility as conditions change but also maintaining communication as changes are made.
- What are the constraints to implementing this plan (travel, cost, safety, attitudes)?
- A “point person” should be designated by each institution to maintain the plan and the communication. A “backup” to the point person should be designated in case the “point person” is temporarily unavailable.
- Trust must be maintained by close communication between the point persons of each university but the partnership must be supported by commitments of a broader range of administrators and faculty than just the designated point persons.

### Conclusions about the Instrument

Field testing the Partnership Exploration Instrument proved that it was useful. It helped to prepare for partnership discussions, to raise pertinent questions in an organized manner, and to assess progress in partnership discussions.

Representatives of the six institutions where the instrument was tested reacted favorably. They were able to follow the instrument (they were always given a copy to follow during discussions), they agreed with the values statements and the ground rules. They agreed to use the instrument as discussions on partnership continued. In every case, however, after the initial use of the instrument, circumstances intervened that delayed or diverted use of the instrument. In Dijon, agreement was reached on an exchange of graduate students (as the next step of the partnership) and a document was drafted but not signed for a year due to a crisis in Dijon that took precedence. With IICA, e-mail difficulties, then a change of...
administration, caused a long lapse in communication that interrupted the momentum toward partnership. In Colima, the partners agreed to pursue a grant with four other institutions but one of those institutions failed to provide needed information before the grant deadline expired. Disappointment led to a lapse of communication about the partnership. In Malaysia, a proposal for a major project was written but institutional approval lagged for over a year delaying discussions on the partnership. In China (both institutions), partnership plans had to be approved by a political body outside the universities. Approvals were positive, but slow. In the case of the Tibetan Agricultural and Animal Husbandry College (TAAHC), a detailed plan, consisting of priorities and action steps, was produced and eventually signed.

In all cases we found that the Partnership Exploration Instrument takes time to complete. If, however, the partners do not get to a written plan before bureaucratic delays, changes of key personnel, crises or other priorities intervene, momentum is lost and it is difficult for the partners to return to the instrument. Discussions seem to start over from the beginning after such delays. On the other hand, we found that delays that would normally kill discussions can be overcome by use of the instrument and the written notes of those who use the instrument.

Results do indicate that the Partnership Exploration Instrument can also benefit offices and agencies of the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) in their work with their land-grant partners. The instrument can guide a process for collaborative needs assessment that can lead to strong university partnerships focused on priority educational programs that will benefit the partners. USDA now has a tool that may enable it to:

1. insure responsive, efficient, and effective management of USDA’s extramural research, extension, and education programs,
2. provide a process to help client universities focus on priorities and self assessment,
3. insure that needs assessment is a prominent part of program planning,
4. gather and assess stakeholder input,
5. clarify expectations of potential partners and identify potential conflicts sooner,
6. promote multidisciplinary projects,
7. integrate teaching, research, and extension activities in international projects,
8. overcome barriers between government agencies and academic institutions, and
9. strengthen efforts of universities to globalize their programs in order to help students, faculty, and agricultural producers become more competitive in global markets.

These benefits may also apply to other governmental and non-governmental agencies and organizations that work with institutional partnerships.
Instrument Recommendations

The Partnership Exploration Instrument should be provided to all directors of international programs in agriculture at land-grant universities. Their assessment of the instrument should be requested after they test and evaluate the instrument in ways suitable to their respective situations.

When reviewing the instrument or preparing to use it, users should adapt it to local conditions.

While using the instrument, administrators, faculty and staff should 1) follow the steps and questions in sequence as given; 2) take enough time at the first meeting(s) to work through Part A that includes all eight steps, but in an abbreviated format; 3) then, as time allows, move on to Part C. This may be done after the first meeting or it may be done by e-mail. At least two persons from each institution should be involved in partnership negotiations to provide backup and insure sustainability.

This article focuses on one U.S. university’s efforts in building partnerships with universities in other countries. The authors believe that the conclusions and recommendations, especially for the use of the Partnership Exploration Instrument, should be applicable to partnerships involving universities, research institutes and development organizations around the world. Time and experience will confirm or contradict that belief.

Summary

This innovative model-building project started August 15, 2000. The “final” report (Etling, 2002) was completed June 30, 2002. The report is final in that it is a summative report of activities and results in developing the instrument. Additional work on testing and refining the instrument is needed to establish validity and reliability. It is now time for this instrument to be disseminated widely and evaluated in diverse settings.

As individuals test and evaluate this instrument they may want to review the previous article that provides two additional instruments useful in forging partnerships (see Tables 1 and 2 on pages 19-20 of this issue).

The Partnership Exploration Instrument will help avoid the trial-and-error approaches that often lead to weak partnerships. It will help develop stronger institutional partnerships that benefit all institutions and individuals involved. Using the Partnership Exploration Instrument can help educational leaders to forge more useful and more stable partnerships.

References


