U.S. Universities Partnering with Universities in Other Countries

Arlen Etling
Associate Director, International Affairs
University of Nebraska, Lincoln
103 Agriculture Hall
Lincoln, NE 68583-0702
Telephone: (402) 472-7018
Fax: (402) 472-7911
E-mail: aetling1@unl.edu

Abstract

Partnerships between U.S. universities and institutions in other countries have often been problematic. The nature of partnership work is often understood differently by the two (or more) institutions. The purpose of this paper is to describe a process that was used to develop and evaluate a set of guidelines for creating international partnerships in higher education. The “participatory rural assessment” methodology for needs assessment was adapted to organize guidelines for discussing the formation of partnerships. Literature on international educational partnerships and needs assessment was reviewed. Experts were questioned by e-mail to determine key questions and issues that should be addressed during partnership formation. The literature review and the expert responses resulted in the content of the guidelines. These guidelines were then tested during the formation of partnerships with six different institutions in five different countries over two years.

Those guidelines then became a “partnership exploration instrument” (Appendix I). During the field testing of these guidelines, much of the discussion between institutions focused on specific projects (usually requests for proposals). A second instrument, needed to analyze the strengths and weaknesses of potential projects, was developed (Appendix II). During the evaluation phase of the partnership development process, another question arose, “Can we be more objective in specifying levels of partnership?” In response to this question, a tentative outline of relative “levels of partnership” was also developed (Appendix III). These instruments need to be more fully evaluated in different settings by different university representatives in order to determine their validity and reliability.
Introduction

Globalization has meant that more institutions of higher education are mindful of their role in the world, beyond their communities, states or provinces. Globalization, with its rapid and continuous change, has also provided frustrations as to “how” to get involved in meaningful partnerships beyond national borders. It has also thrown old relationships, based on the post-World War II understanding of development, into question.

International partnerships are critical if U.S. universities are to be globalized. Globalization is critical if U.S. land-grant universities are to realize their mission and serve their constituents (students, faculty, staff and agriculturalists of the state) in this global age. Partnerships mean different things, however, to different institutions and individuals. So, how do universities in different countries decide what they mutually need when they seek partnership? How do they create partnerships that are dynamic and beneficial? How do they evaluate “partnerships” once they are established? These are the key questions that this philosophical paper addresses.

U.S. higher education institutions are increasingly being asked by counter-part institutions overseas to work together. Often implied, however, are assumptions that the U.S. institution will bring sufficient funding to do the work (based on that older understanding of development). The nature of the partnership work is often understood vaguely or entirely differently by the two institutions. As CSREES works to facilitate creation of mutually beneficial partnerships between these institutions, it would be helpful to have a start-up tool available which both assesses institutional needs and, in so doing, ensures the involvement and buy-in of all stakeholders. Such buy-in is critical for long-lasting partnerships.

The Problem

Much has been written about needs assessment in education. Until recently, however, the bulk of the literature has addressed secondary schools. Etling (1994) wrote a manual for needs assessment, including an extensive bibliography, focused on educational programs outside the formal school classroom. He and Carey also reviewed variations to “rapid rural appraisal” and “participatory rural appraisal (PRA)” used in international development work, and he adapted PRA for different settings and conditions (Carey & Etling, 1997). PRA seemed to provide a methodology for needs assessment suited to the problem of forming partnerships among institutions of higher education across national boundaries.

The Participatory Rural Appraisal approach has been used for several years in other arenas to assess needs in an inclusive manner that assures buy-in (Selener, et. al, 1999; World Resources Institute, n.d.). But it has never been used as a means to kick-off higher educational partnerships. PRA, adapted to university settings, seemed to provide a logical and practical methodology for guiding partnership development.

PRA consists of eight steps: 1) site selection, 2) formation of a team representing stakeholder groups and technical expertise, 3) data collection (using diverse techniques) on problems and opportunities, 4) data synthesis and analysis in a humanistic manner, 5) ranking problems and opportunities, 6) writing a resource management plan, 7) implementation, and 8) evaluation of the process (World Resources Institute, n.d.).
Its advantages are: 1) systematic involvement of all concerned, 2) interactive, interdisciplinary problem solving, 3) quick, inexpensive, and easy to accomplish, 4) balances perspectives of insiders with outside specialists, 5) helps communities to prepare proposals for external support, 6) mobilizes participants to act, 7) strengthens relationships among participating groups, and 8) participants tend to “wake up” to a new reality (Selener, et. al., 1999).

Although developed for village-level needs assessment and resource management, PRA has been adapted to assess the training needs of formal and nonformal youth educators in Costa Rica (through a project sponsored by National 4-H Council and funded by USAID). The adapted version of PRA worked extremely well, however substantial modification was required.

**Purpose**

The purpose of this paper is to describe a process that was used to develop and evaluate a set of guidelines for creating international partnerships in higher education. This process was funded by a USDA “innovation grant.” The process answers the three key questions posed in the introduction above.

**Specific Objectives**

The specific objectives of the process reported here were 1) modify and adapt the PRA to serve as an instrument to guide the formation of institutional partnerships, then 2) test the instrument in the field.

**Data Sources**

Data sources included a review of literature and the opinions of a panel of experts. The review of literature on international educational partnerships and needs assessment established important criteria and key questions for building partnerships. While this literature review was progressing, a panel of experts (twenty-five directors of international programs offices, or projects, at land-grant universities) were asked their opinion of key criteria and questions in forming partnerships with institutions in other countries.

The two data sources generally identified the same issues. A few issues were revealed by the literature that were not mentioned by the experts. A few issues were generated by the experts that were not mentioned in the literature.

**Procedure**

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 resubmitted to the experts for them to agree, disagree, amend, and return. Eight of the experts completed both rounds.
As the modified Delphi questionnaire was being conducted, the eight steps of the “participatory rural assessment” methodology were translated into steps appropriate for assessing the efficacy of a university partnership and guiding the development of the partnership. This was accomplished by combining the experience of the principal investigator with library research. A draft “university partnership exploration” instrument was produced. This instrument consisted of questions and guidelines to be used on site for discussions between institutional representatives (see appendix I).

The instrument was then field tested with six educational institutions in five countries: 1) ENESAD (French university in Dijon); 2) I.I.C.A. (an educational consulting group located in Costa Rica, initiated by the Organization of American States, 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 Malaysian Ministry of Agriculture; 5) the Tibetan Agricultural and Animal Husbandry College; and 6) the University of Tibet. After refinements, the final “partnership exploration instrument” resulted (appendix I).

This innovative model-building project started Aug. 15, 2000. This “final” report was completed (June 30, 2002). This report is final in that it is a summative report of activities and results in developing the instrument. Work on testing and refining the instrument, however, should continue in order to establish validity and reliability.

Results

The full “partnership exploration instrument” can be found in appendix I. During the field testing of this instrument, much of the discussion focused on specific projects (usually requests for proposals) which the partnership would address. A second instrument seemed to be needed to help analyze the potential of a given project to meet the institutional needs of each partner. This instrument can be found in appendix II. It can be used by each institution, internally, to help unify the potential stakeholders as they consider a project for later discussion by those involved with the partnership exploration instrument.

At the eighth and last step of partnership exploration (the evaluation step), another question arose, “How do we know if we are making progress as partners?” There are obviously different levels of partnership ranging from weak to strong. “Weak” and “strong” are very subjective terms, however, so a more objective scale, specifying levels of partnership, was developed. This scale can be found in appendix III.

Conclusions

The partnership exploration instrument worked for the author. It helped him 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 which took precedence. With IICA e-mail difficulties, then a change of administration, caused a long lapse in communication which 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, the partnership exploration instrument takes time. 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. The situation changes and discussions seem to necessarily start over again from the beginning after such delays. Delays that would normally kill discussions, however, can be overcome by the instrument.

Results do indicate that the partnership exploration instrument, if followed carefully with consideration for the local culture, institutions, and personalities, can
1. define “collaborative development,”
2. outline the steps of a process that is complete and transparent,
3. provide guidelines and key questions for participants to complete each step,
4. insure equality among participants avoiding coercion and manipulation,
5. describe how data will be collected in order for decisions to be made,
6. take account of different ideologies among partners, and
7. lead to a “win-win outcome”.

One result of this study is that the partnership exploration instrument can benefit the International Programs Office of CSREES/USDA. The instrument can guide a process for collaborative needs assessment which can lead to strong university partnerships focused on priority educational programs that will benefit all of the partners. USDA will have a tool that may enable it to
1. ensure 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. ensure 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 multi disciplinary 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.

The low response from the experts (eight of 25 responded to both rounds) can be explained by two factors: 1) the questionnaires were circulated in September, which was
a busy month for university administrators; and 2) the experts did not see much value in such an instrument. Probably both, and perhaps other factors, explain the low response.

**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 and they should be invited to “test” the instrument in ways suitable to their respective situations.

When reviewing the instrument or preparing to use it, 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 page one which includes all eight steps, but in an abbreviated format;
3) then, as time allows, move on to page three. This may be done after the first meeting. It may be done by e-mail.
4) At least two representatives of each institution should be involved in this process to increase the chances of a sustainable partnership.

For further study, researchers should test the instrument in different settings under different conditions. Subsequent communication with non-respondents should be conducted in an attempt to explain their non-response. The instrument should be tested by representatives of other organizations and agencies, like USAID to see if the instrument works for them. It should also be tested by field workers in other countries to help provide a grassroots point of view.

The “partnership exploration” instrument should also be disseminated to other potential users via articles in periodicals and presentations at appropriate conferences.

**Educational Importance**

U.S. universities are increasingly being requested and required to form partnerships. The partnership exploration instrument, will help avoid the current trial-and-error approaches which often lead to static, unfocused partnerships. It will help develop stronger institutional partnerships that benefit all institutions and individuals involved.

**References**


Colleges and Universities Partnering for International Development

http://www.aascu.org/alo/CUPID/us.htm
Educational Partnerships Case Studies


Martin, James, and Samels, James E. (2002). We were wrong: Try partnerships, not mergers. The Chronicle of Higher Education, May 17.


Appendices

Appendix I: Partnership Exploration Instrument

1. PURPOSE
- To explore the possibility for (expanded) partnership between our two institutions.

2. PRELIMINARIES
- Given the schedule how should our time be used?
- Who should be involved in these discussions (at least two persons from each side).
- Background. What is the current situation (climate) at the two universities which encourages or discourages partnership?
- Clarify values – What institutional values will help or hinder partnership?
- Do we agree on ground rules for working together?

3. SHARING NEW INFORMATION
- Maps of physical facilities -organizational chart(s)
- What are our strongest academic programs? What are yours?
- Other graduate, undergraduate and non-degree programs of interest
- How will we each bear the burden for funding? What external grants should be pursued?
- What other information would you like to receive from our institution?
- How do we go about assembling needed information? What are the next steps?
4. ANALYZE AND SYNTHESIZE ANY NEEDED DATA, COLLECT MORE IF NEEDED

5. RANK STRENGTHS, NEEDS AND OPPORTUNITIES

6. WRITE A PLAN  (Tell 1) who 2) does what 3) when to address priorities)

7. IMPLEMENT

8. EVALUATE
   -How will we evaluate our partnership? -Who will be responsible for evaluation?
   -How will evaluation results be shared?

VALUES OF IANR INTERNATIONAL PROGRAMS:

-We attempt to balance our program emphasis among faculty, students and residents of the state while linking with partners outside Nebraska and the United States;
-We emphasize partnership over development and teamwork for programming;
-We value creativity over money and integrity over competitive advantage;
-Our ethical principles will include universal values embraced by major religions and humanistic philosophies;
-We will not try to be all things to all people everywhere all of the time;
-We will not accept funds that do not fit our program priorities and partners’ needs;
-Moderation is preferred over excess;
-We will emphasize innovation over duplication; we will seek new methodologies for program planning, implementation and evaluation, rather than relying on worn-out methods that are no longer consistent with our values and ethical principles;
-We will question everything and invite partners to do the same.

GROUND RULES FOR DEVELOPING PARTNERSHIPS:

-We must respect each other’s differences, strengths and needs.
-We must clarify internal (within the institution) conditions and external conditions which affect our respective strengths and needs.
-We must be open, transparent, throughout this process.
-We must maintain confidentiality of information shared through this process to prevent any penalty to a partner for openness and transparency.
-We must agree that partnerships are complex and tenuous – much effort is required to create them and much effort is required to maintain them.
-We need to explore opportunities and impediments to partnerships in depth while avoiding unnecessary complexity.

QUESTIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR LATER MEETINGS (OR CORRESPONDENCE):
   -Have previous contacts been all 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, 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 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, web page?
-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 which 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?

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?

THE 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.
Appendix II: Project Analysis Worksheet

Potential Project for ________________________________________________ (location)

Subject matter focus: ________________________________________________

   What other subject matter might complement the primary focus?

Why should we focus on this project?

What is happening now? What has happened before in this area?

Who would benefit on-site from this project? How?

Who at our institution would benefit from the project? How?

How could activities be expanded to benefit more groups or individuals?

Who might have funds to support this project?

Write 1-3 specific, measurable objectives that would satisfy most of the stakeholders:

Is there more than one focus/project here?

Who will keep this group talking/planning? Chair ________________________ Co-chair ________________________

Next meeting date _______________ Who else should be invited?

Appendix III: Partnership Levels

Level 5 - working together on formal agreements with shared budget over three or more years as co-equal decision makers

Level 4 - formal agreement; shared budget; less than three years; not co-equal decision makers

Level 3 - reciprocal exchanges involving both faculty and student groups for more than three consecutive years

Level 2 - joint meetings and/or exchanges of individual faculty and/or students over the last five year period but exchanges are not necessarily coordinated or consecutive

Level 1 - have signed an MOU, joint proposal or other formal document of intent to collaborate

Potential Partners