Creating International Partnerships in Higher Education

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U.S. institutions of higher education are being asked, increasingly, for help by counterpart institutions overseas. Sometimes the requests are to fund local projects; sometimes for tuition waivers for faculty to pursue advanced degrees. Often the true intent of the request is different than the expressed request. Sometimes the request is sincere but the benefits to both universities are not evident. Often the administrators or faculty members at one university have a difficult time determining if (and how) they should respond to the request.

Sometimes the request generates agreement to collaborate. A year or two later the partners find themselves disagreeing on key elements of the collaboration. They find that each side has been diplomatically using rhetoric thought to be desirable to the other side. Several months are required to work out what is needed and how that is different than what was originally discussed.

A method was needed to address this problem. The method should guide the two potential partners through the process of identifying needs, strengths, challenges and resources, so that solid partnerships can be formed in a time-efficient manner based on a common understanding.

The purpose of this model-building study was to develop and test a method for creating international partnerships in higher education. A USDA “innovation grant” funded the study.

The methods included a modified delphi questionnaire with a panel of experts to formulate the approach for forming solid partnerships. “Participatory rural assessment” was then used to organize the responses of the experts into an instrument outlining steps and questions to be completed. Field testing was then done in six different countries to validate the instrument. The procedure for the study included four stages. 1) A group of “experts” (directors of international agricultural programs at land grant universities) participated in the delphi survey. 2) Their responses were translated into a draft “university partnership exploration” instrument. 3) The resulting list of questions and guidelines (the instrument) was then field tested with six educational institutions in six different countries. 4) Results were used to refine the instrument.

Conclusions. The instrument developed in this study will help 1) clarify expectations of potential partners and identify potential conflicts sooner, 2) provide a process to help client universities focus on priorities, 3) ensure that needs assessment is a prominent part of program planning, 4) encourage universities to seek and use external stakeholder input, 5) promote multi-disciplinary projects, 6) integrate teaching, research and extension activities in international projects, 7) overcome barriers between government agencies and academic institutions, and 8) strengthen efforts of universities to globalize their programs in order to help students, faculty, and agricultural producers become more competitive in world markets.

Educational importance. The “university partnership exploration” instrument 1) defines “collaborative development,” 2) encourages equality among participants avoiding coercion and manipulation, 3) assumes different ideologies among partners, 4) can lead to a “win-win” outcome, 5) can guide land grant institutions with self-assessment, and 6) can ensure responsive, efficient, and effective management, on the part of USDA, of its extramural research, extension, and educational programs. Ultimately the instrument helps develop stronger institutional partnerships that benefit all involved.

In addition to this instrument, different levels of partnership were identified and described. This description helps to define partnership and establish partnership levels ranging from superficial to substantive.