Issues and Procedures in Forging International University Partnerships

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Abstract

Partnerships between U.S. universities and institutions in other countries have often been problematic. Some universities think they have achieved partnership when they agree to cooperate on a project or even a proposal. Others feel they have a partnership when they sign a memorandum of understanding. The nature of any particular partnership, however, is often understood differently by the two (or more) institutions involved in the partnership. This difference in understanding often leads to miscommunication, frustration and strained relationships between the institutions and their representatives. The purpose of this article is to explore issues related to developing university partnerships across national boundaries. The two co-authors approach these issues from different points of view and from different experiences. Pooling those different perspectives, they draw conclusions about forming successful partnerships.

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

What is a real partnership? Why do some partnerships work effectively to achieve common goals and strengthening each member of the partnership? Why do others accomplish little and often end in miscommunication, frustration and strained relationships? When some universities boast of their partnerships with universities in other countries, they cite the number of memoranda of understanding (MOU) that they have signed as evidence of partnerships. An international programs director at one U.S. university, however, stated that he was cutting the number of memoranda of understanding with universities in other countries from 200 to approximately 25 because most of the documents were out of date and had amounted to little more than good intentions. Partnerships, however, can be much more than good intentions. They can increase the expertise available for a project and enable the partners to share a workload that is too large for each partner. They can raise the prospects for funding by strengthening proposals and allowing a synergy of resources. They can strengthen advocacy efforts and enhance the reputation of individual partners. They can expand opportunities for staff development and provide future benefits that were not even anticipated when the partnership was formed.

Due to the recent economic downturn, Martin and Samels (1994), authors of Merging Colleges for Mutual Growth: A New Strategy for Academic Managers, predicted that mergers between universities would occur. More recently, however, they stated in The Chronicle of Higher Education (2002), “We were wrong; try partnerships, not mergers.” They now advocate “strategic alliances” in order to preserve educational missions, strengthen and enrich fundamental objectives, maintain academic-governance systems, create new income streams, save resources and cut costs, and provide new opportunities for teaching and research. Partnerships are also encouraged by globalization.

Globalization has meant that more institutions of higher education are mindful of their roles in the world beyond their communities, states or provinces. Globalization, with its rapid and continuous change, has also created frustrations as to “how” to get involved in meaningful partnerships beyond national borders. It has thrown old relationships, based on the post-World War II understanding of development, into question. Immediately after World War II, development was defined by the “developed” countries as a process that they initiated for the benefit of “underdeveloped” countries. This relationship was inherently unequal. In the 21st Century most policy makers want their countries to be treated as equals at least in terms of decision making.

International partnerships are critical if universities are to be globalized. Understanding globalization and operating with a global perspective is especially critical if U.S. land-grant universities are to realize their mission and serve their constituents (students, faculty, staff and citizens) 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 article addresses.

The purpose of this article is to explore issues related to developing university partnerships across national boundaries. The two co-authors approach these issues from different points of view and from different experiences. Combining those different perspectives, they draw conclusions about forming successful partnerships. Since their experience is primarily with U.S. land grant universities...
(public universities established by Congress beginning in 1862 to teach agricultural and mechanical sciences), this article focuses on those universities. Most of the issues, however relate to universities, research institutes and development organizations in other countries as well.

**Background**

The Association for International Agricultural and Extension Education (AIAEE) recognizes the importance of this issue of partnerships. At the 2002 annual conference of AIAEE, Michael McGirr, then Acting Director of the International Programs Office of CSREES, U.S. Department of Agriculture, was asked to lead a special session to focus on institutional partnerships. McGirr had been involved for over 15 years organizing projects where U.S. universities partnered with universities, governmental agencies and non-governmental organizations for international development. McGirr asked Arlen Etling, Director of International Programs in Agriculture for the Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources, University of Nebraska, Lincoln, to present his perspectives in the special AIAEE session. Etling had worked on international development projects requiring partnership since 1967. Most of his experience was as a faculty member at three U.S. land grant universities.

Despite differences in background, McGirr and Etling found that they agreed on most of the issues related to forming partnerships. The special session on partnerships began a conversation between the two individuals that helped them define partnership more precisely and identify many of the issues related to forging successful partnerships. They especially agreed on the guiding characteristics of partnerships, on the pitfalls in forming partnerships, and on the need to carefully consider the cross-cultural dimension. They agreed on some practical tips to help others forge their own partnerships.

**Characteristics**

Strong, productive partnerships seem to have a number of common characteristics:
- shared goals and values (not necessarily identical, but compatible and defined at the outset),
- clear expectations (right from the start, but with understanding they can change over time),
- joint planning (collaboratively set goals and implementation plan; roles of individuals working on collaborative projects are clearly defined),
- trust is developed and maintained (trust takes years to build, but can be jeopardized by a single misstep),
- perceived rewards must outweigh risks,
- open/honest communication (reaching agreement before acting unilaterally is critical),
- “win-win” outcome anticipated (mutual self-interests are essential in any partnership),
- commitment from the top (strong support from top administrators facilitates the promotion of partnership by those who implement partnership activities),
- flexible, adaptable (allows partners to broaden or narrow the scope of work, and to strengthen relationships),
- synergy (total value of the partnership is greater than the sum of the parts),
- equity (lopsided costs or benefits to partners can create problems),
- all partners contribute (similar to equity – can be more problematic with multiple partners),
- enduring rather than episodic (promotes longer-term sustainability), and
- expanding and growing (good partnerships often grow in unpredictable, yet beneficial ways).
Obviously these characteristics are interrelated. Building a partnership is like building a spider web. Strengthening one characteristic will help to strengthen others; but if too much effort is spent on one characteristic, others may suffer.

**Pitfalls**

Neglecting any of the above characteristics would be a pitfall in constructing a partnership. Especially important, and to be avoided if at all possible, are:

- any action that creates mistrust,
- ignoring organizational hierarchy,
- acting unilaterally,
- not sharing control,
- one partner dictating to another,
- poor communication,
- inability to mesh different systems (decision making, accounting, supporting personnel),
- not sharing rewards and credit, and
- not sharing risks and failures.

Most of these pitfalls result from poor communication. When one partner does not keep the other informed, problems may cascade. This pitfall can be avoided if key individuals are selected at each partner institution to handle communication. These key contacts must also have backups in case the primary contact is unavailable at a critical point in the communication. Likewise, communication should be constant and maintained in a calm tone. Infrequent communication, punctuated by panic, can be very destructive.

Communication within the partner institutions is also critical. If disagreements exist internally, if different individuals speak with different priorities for their institution, or if changes occur within the institution that change its message to external partners, communication problems with partners are likely to result.

**The Cross-cultural Dimension**

Building a partnership with universities in different countries creates the potential for additional cross-cultural challenges. In such cases there is more room for misunderstandings to occur, making trust and effective communication that much more important. Language differences and nonverbal communication can send messages that were unintended and confusing. Stereotypes must be overcome – national, ethnic, gender and/or organizational biases are destructive. Formality and protocol must be observed, especially in the early stages of partnerships. Over all of these issues hangs the specter of employing a “colonial” approach when one partner believes it has most of the resources and expertise or, conversely, a partner perceives that it has less to contribute to the partnership and is merely a passive beneficiary.

**Practical Tips**

These characteristics, pitfalls and consideration of the cross-cultural dimension suggest some practical advice. Before you enter discussions with another institution, call an internal meeting to make certain everyone agrees on the purpose of the partnership. Include individuals in this meeting who have experience with the culture of the prospective partner institution. Choose partners carefully. Research their capabilities, vision, values, past projects and partners. Consider the value they will add and the reputation they will bring with them. Consider the characteristics of a strong partnership and the list of pitfalls before approaching a potential partner.

Reach outside your circle of contacts. Consider a wide range of potential partners before you focus too narrowly. Old partners can be more comfortable, but probably will not stretch you in new directions. Develop a capabilities statement (like an institutional resume) to clarify institutional strengths and weaknesses. Do not disguise or ignore potential problems at
this point because they will likely emerge again later. Identify specific areas of common interest. State these clearly for each other. Build upon personal relationships – but do not over-emphasize personalities over more important considerations. Take small steps, to build trust and rapport, and then scale up. Appreciate and benefit from the differences that you uncover as you proceed (they are one of the reasons you decide to partner in the first place). Be sensitive about when to compromise and when to hold your ground.

Recognize when it is time to quit. This may occur when you encounter irreconcilable differences, when key individuals in the partnership experience burnout, when institutional support for the partnership changes, or when the conditions calling for partnership no longer exist. Collaboratively monitor and evaluate the partnership. Market your successes. Report the accomplishments. Circulate successes and accomplishments so they are not ignored or forgotten. Finally, learn from failure.

All of these characteristics, pitfalls, practical tips and consideration of the cross-cultural dimension are preliminary to the process for forming a partnership. Let us now turn our attention to that process. Two steps are recommended: 1) at your own institution, discuss the issues related to the partnership so that internal agreement (agreement among faculty, staff and administrators internal to your institution) exists; and 2) develop a partnership plan with the prospective partner institution.

**Internal Agreement**

To guide discussions at your own institution, the authors suggest the following questions (Table 1). They can be used for building consensus.

### Table 1

**Project-Analysis Worksheet**

| Potential project on ____________________________________________ (subject matter focus) with ____________________________ (partner). |
| What other subject matter might complement the primary focus? |
| Why should we focus on this project with this partner? |
| What are we currently doing with this subject matter? What does the literature indicate? |
| How would our partner benefit from this project? Who, specifically, would benefit? |
| How would our institution benefit from the project? Who, specifically, would benefit? |
| 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? |
Planning Collaboratively with the Prospective Partner

Developing partnerships, we believe, is similar to a program-planning process (Etling & Maloney, 1994) where one considers the situation, assesses needs, writes objectives, analyzes resources, and formulates a plan that is then implemented and evaluated. The Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) is another approach (Selener, et al., 1999; World Resources Institute, n.d.) that has been used for many years to assess needs and develop resource management plans in an inclusive manner that assures buy-in. Although it is not normally used as a means to initiate educational partnerships, PRA adapted to university settings provides 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.).

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Partnership Levels</th>
<th>Partnership Actions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Potential Partners</td>
<td>Each partner agrees that partnership would be desirable.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Partners have signed an MOU, joint proposal or other formal document of intent to collaborate.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Joint meetings and/or exchanges of individual faculty and/or students over the last five years but exchanges are not necessarily coordinated or consecutive.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Reciprocal exchanges involving both faculty and student groups for more than three consecutive years.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Partners are working to implement a written plan with a shared budget for less than three years; they may or may not be co-equal decision makers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Working together on a formal agreement with a written plan and shared budget over three or more years as co-equal decision makers.</td>
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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).

Either the seven steps of the program-planning process or the eight steps of PRA could be used as a framework to guide partnership discussions. Specific steps and detailed questions would need to be elaborated, however, to make this process work.

Evaluating Progress toward Partnership

How do we know if partnership has been achieved? We need a scale that describes the degree of partnership. The authors propose, based on their experience, the following scale (Table 2) that moves from “potential partners” through five levels of progressively stronger partnership. Other scales may be developed through experience in partnering.
Summary

So, how do universities in different countries decide what they mutually need when they consider partnership? They can review the characteristics of partnerships to help decide which aspects are important to them. They should consider the potential pitfalls and the cross-cultural dimension to determine if the costs of forming the partnerships are likely to be offset by the benefits.

How do they create partnerships that are dynamic and beneficial? They should follow the advice in the Practical Tips section above as well as the sections on Internal Agreement and Planning Collaboratively with the Prospective Partner.

How do they evaluate partnerships once they are established? This can be done by using the partnership levels scale (Table II). The list of characteristics, the pitfalls, and the practical tips will also serve as checklists for formative and summative evaluation.

This is the authors’ advice based on their experiences in developing university partnerships over the last thirty-eight years. The next step is to construct a set of steps and questions, or an instrument, to guide the collaborative planning stage. Those steps and questions can be organized within the seven steps of program planning or the eight steps of PRA. Then that instrument and the authors’ suggestions need to be tested through practice and through formal research studies.

Universities, and other institutions and organizations, are increasingly being requested and required to form partnerships.

They need to avoid the current trial-and-error approaches that often lead to static, unfocused partnerships. They need to develop stronger institutional partnerships that benefit all institutions and individuals involved. Using the characteristics, pitfalls, cross-cultural dimension and the practical tips from this article, educational leaders in universities and in other organizations can develop partnerships that move beyond the MOU to a more useful and more stable partnership.

References


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