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Topic: International Higher Education Collaboration Initiatives

Title: Identification of Factors Leading to Successful and Unsuccessful International Higher Education Collaboration Initiatives with Focus on Developing Countries

Thesis: The reader should leave with a clear sense of lessons learned and suggestions for best practices moving forward for the implementation of an International Higher Education Collaborations, particularly in regard to developing countries.

I. Introduction

As the world becomes further globalized and interconnected, the barriers between educational institutions diminish. In recent years there has been an impressive expansion of cross-border higher education initiatives. This expansion is characterized by the growing imperative of higher education institutions to internationalize. Higher education institutions have a wealth of experience in this area, and are rapidly expanding their cooperation with their counterparts around the world. There is particular interest in emerging economies and the role that collaboration and partnerships in higher education can have, leading to mutually beneficial opportunities and economic growth. While these collaborations are a clear need, and can be, *and have been*, proven to be beneficial, there are also examples of these partnerships and collaborations failing--often due to inequitable partnerships, lack of communication, management/staffing issues or other similar challenges that could have been addressed at the onset of the activity. Further, despite this growing movement, there is surprisingly little shared about best practices. As a member of the newly launched MIT Jameel World Education Lab (J-WEL) which aims to act as a hub of collaboration for universities across the globe and create a community of global learners, I have a direct interest in this line of research. We are in the nascent stages of considering best strategies for international higher education partnership. Similar to the focus of this paper, we foresee the majority of these partners coming from developing countries (thus far two universities in Colombia, one in Mexico and one in Japan has signed on for higher education membership). The leadership of J-WEL has been involved in similar endeavors and bringing their various lessons learned, though there is still not a cohesive agreement on approach, as apparent in in-person interviews conducted as research for this paper. Given my direct involvement in an aspiring hub for international collaboration, and having the opportunity to be privy to high-level conversations about the development of this, and other similar initiatives, I was surprised (and was informed) about the lack of available data and lessons learned. While considering my focus for this course, I realized a great need for this space is an easy-to-use, follow and replication Framework for international collaborations between US universities and counterparts in the developing world.

In this essay, I will provide a context for the importance of these collaborations, provide several case studies, and conclude by pulling from my research, professional experience and other data points to create a proposed Framework for success for developing international higher educational collaborations between US universities and universities in developing countries.

II. Background

In 2011, the American Council for Education (ACE) sent a survey to their members, and found that almost half offered one or more collaborative international programs.¹ “Along similar lines, a 2013 survey by the International Association of Universities (IAU) found that among 782 institutions worldwide that reported data on international collaborative degree programs, 64 percent offered joint degree programs with partners abroad, and 80 percent offered dual degree programs.”² This data clearly represents a growing trend for US universities to “internationalize,” and collaborate in meaningful ways with colleagues and peer institutions abroad. International agencies also understand the importance and opportunity in higher education collaborations. “In 1998, the World Conference on Higher Education (WCHE), organized by UNESCO, put forth a call for the higher education sector to become more engaged in international development agendas, particularly sustainable sociocultural and economic development. This conference also highlighted that international cooperation and exchange were major avenues for advancing higher education around the world.”³

Varying iterations of international higher education collaborations are emerging in institutions across the US. To highlight a few examples: Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) has recently introduced an over-arching strategic plan which defines key areas of interest and activity; Stanford University has the Stanford Global Studies (SGS) Division, which acts as the university’s hub for education, research, and community engagement centered on exploring issues, societies, and cultures in regional and global perspective.⁴

¹ <http://www.acenet.edu/news-room/Documents/CIGE-Insights-Intl-Higher-Ed-Partnerships.pdf>

² *ibid*

³ George Mwangi, C. c. (2017). Partner Positioning: Examining International Higher Education Partnerships through a Mutuality Lens. *Review Of Higher Education*, 41(1), 33-60.

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⁴ <https://sgs.stanford.edu/>

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At Arizona State University (ASU), there is Global@ASU program with the following mission statement:

*Arizona State University is helping universities worldwide to rethink how higher education functions to educate the greatest number of students to the highest global standards at sustainable cost.*⁵

These are a limited set of examples of a vast number of American universities looking to further grow and acknowledge the importance of international collaborations towards their own mission and goals.

As stated, collaboration assumes that there is contribution and interest on both sides. From the perspective of a university in a developing country, cross-border education has been acknowledged as an important tool for capacity building⁶, which is a great benefit for universities that may suffer from a lack of investment, internal conflict, or a relatively new educational system. Further, universities in developing countries represent important nodes for information, particularly in terms of local challenges--which create an exciting opportunity for student engagement and research topics for faculty in institutions in the US. For example, in South Africa, where HIV/AIDS is a major health crisis, (with ~1000 new infections each day⁷) there is also world class university-based research and researchers addressing the challenges taking place in their own country--providing them a much richer and more robust understanding of the challenges versus researchers far removed from the crisis continents away. This has lead numerous high-profile American universities to connect with South African universities including MIT, which sends students each year to work with South African researchers, and holds an annual class in addition to direct lab-lab interaction, and a good example of international university collaboration.

Despite this fertile ground for reciprocity, too often these partnerships are framed as US institutions "saving" or "helping" (as in the case of ASU) those in developing nations versus a more equal collaboration. Professor Mwangi of U-MASS Amherst points out that this is an area within the field where there is little reflection. "To date,

⁵ Global@ASU Website: <https://global.asu.edu/>, assessed December 1, 2017

⁶ Vincent-Lancrin, S. (2007). Developing Capacity through Cross-Border Tertiary Education. In D. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and (Ed.) , Cross-Border Tertiary Education: A Way towards Capacity Development (pp. 47-108). Paris and Washington, D.C. : Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development; Washington, D.C.: World Bank.

⁷ PBS NewsHour, *How South Africa, the nation hardest-hit by HIV, plans to 'end AIDS'*, July 21, 2016. <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/south-africa-nation-hardest-hit-hiv-plans-end-aids>

much of the work on international higher education partnerships emphasize capacity building and sustainability, but what is lacking is whether these outcomes occur through one-sided, external support or a two-way transfer of knowledge and mutual benefit.”⁸ Similarly to the above example of US institution engagement with those in South Africa, Professor Mwangi finds that the “Majority World” partner is expected to build capacity and learn from the Minority World partner, but not vice versa. Thus, knowledge transfer and capacity building becomes one dimensional and patriarchal, rather than partnership-focused. In her thorough assessments, she suggests that there needs to be heightened attention to mutuality, and that this “can help individuals and institutions in partnerships uphold the shared ethical principles of higher education, such as the promotion of positive social change, non-maleficence, and justice, to better serve their communities locally and globally.”⁹

Further, institutions (in the US and abroad) are also generally not well-structured to support international collaborative partnerships. Such collaborations struggle, at times, to become institutionalized because higher education institutions generally work in departmental silos and within bureaucratic/hierarchical administrative structures. Campuses across the country have attempted to develop a host of initiatives without, first, taking on the challenge of reorganizing, only to find these entrepreneurial efforts thwarted by the traditional structures. This takes away the opportunity for major impact following these collaborations because the engagement usually becomes stuck at the individual or programmatic level.

III. Case Studies

University of Colorado Denver (CU-Denver) and the Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla (BUAP), Mexico

The United States and Mexico are closely linked geographically, geopolitically and economically, and there is a long, complicated history and relationship. “Twenty years after the 1994 North American Free Trade Agreement was signed by the United States, Mexico, and Canada, Mexico continues to struggle to enter the world economy, and the distribution of wealth and access to economic and educational opportunity remains uneven for Mexican youth and families and, increasingly, for many sectors of US society. Meanwhile, millions of Mexicans continue to cross the border into the United States, and US educators and schools struggle to meet the educational, linguistic, and

⁸ George Mwangi, C. c. (2017). Partner Positioning: Examining International Higher Education Partnerships through a Mutuality Lens. *Review Of Higher Education*, 41(1), 33-60.

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⁹ ibid

cultural needs of the children from immigrant families. Against this backdrop, exchanges and collaborations involving students, teachers, faculty, and universities may be one of the most important strategies for moving things forward.”¹⁰ With this backdrop, and an eagerness for both countries to collaborate, in 2004, two universities, University of Colorado Denver (CU-Denver) and the Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla (BUAP), decided to partner on several initiatives: 1. CU-Denver contributed a faculty member in the BUAP’s Foreign Languages Department to establish a new Master’s program in English language teaching; professional conferences; elective summer courses involving students from both universities; and facilitation of research work (resulting in 12 shared publications).

As with most international collaboration in higher education, there were things that worked well and those that did not. Members of the faculty from both Colorado and Mexico shared that regular meetings helped to facilitate an efficient and effective flow of communication. Further, while the majority of students went from Puebla to Denver, there was significant focus put on school visits, greatly benefitting both university by an infusion of ideas, exposure to culture and work approaches. Finally, faculty members shared in advising these student, which allowed them the space to define shared assessments and metrics, in a respectful deliberate process.

Difficulties and challenges with communication presented themselves from the onset of this collaboration, due in most part to a lack of appreciation for the difficulty of communication across international borders with different native languages. This led to many logistical difficulties which affected program outcomes and overall interest and enthusiasm. “Some BUAP faculty members maligned the partnership as an “uneven playing field” with unequal footing between the Institutions and among participants. It is true that while the BUAP hosted Colorado Ph.D. faculty and experts, BUAP faculty were not involved in similar activities in Colorado. We note that early on in the collaboration, many BUAP colleagues had their Master’s degrees and were working on, but had not yet attained, their Ph.D.”¹¹ It was suggested that had mutually shared goals been defined in the beginning, then communication would have been solved, because it would be required, and this would lead to more fluid sustainability and integration because there are clear, transparent, and desired outcomes on both sides.

¹⁰ Thomas-Ruzic, M., & Prudencio, F. E. (2015). North-South Collaborations: Learning from a Decade of Intercultural Experiences for Teachers and Faculty in One Mexican and US University Partnership. *International Journal Of Teaching And Learning In Higher Education*, 27(3), 382-392.

¹¹ *ibid*

MIT-Portugal

In 2006, the Portuguese government and MIT launched the MIT-Portugal Program (MPP) as an “integrative, university-centered innovation strategy that aims at reorienting Portuguese engineering education and research around the issues of innovation, entrepreneurship and technology management, serving as an incubator to establish missing links between universities and industry.” MPP operates as a highly integrative education and research consortium that effectively links a single high-profile U.S. research university-MIT-to a whole segment of the Portuguese higher education and research system, including 8 schools of engineering, science and economics and 20 research centers, as well as government and industry from Portugal and Europe.

A cohesive 2010 study found that “MPP indeed represents an apposite, effective and comprehensive policy response to Portugal's imminent innovation challenges. The concerted combination of multiple policy tools has yielded important and visible successes, most notably in the creation of strong and international education programs, an unprecedented degree of networking and collaboration among Portuguese researchers and institutions, and the re-orientation of engineering education around innovation and industry needs”¹² Though it also found barriers to implementation and areas for improvement, including namely poor communication and administration, surprising low capacity among colleagues in Portugal (of which there was no understanding or expectation), and finally a difficulty to maintain consistent benefit to MIT.

Secondly, the assessment has revealed significant opportunities for program improvement as well as some persistent barriers to implementation, in particular in the domains of industry linkages, program outreach and communication, and certain systemic and legal challenges that frame MPP's operation within the Portuguese system.

This program concluded, in its complete form was not renewed, and a majority of the aspects of the partnership were closed.

Public and Private Universities Across Africa Collaborate with Global North

Public and private universities in Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, South Africa, and elsewhere in Africa, were experiencing all time high enrollments since the late 1990s. To address

¹² Pfothenauer, S. M., Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Engineering Systems, D., & Technology and Policy, P. (2010). *Integrative university collaborations as an innovation strategy for catching-up countries : a case study of the MIT-Portugal Program*. c2010.

these demands, university administrators sought partnerships with universities of the global North to facilitate the necessary educational reform and curriculum transformation to meet the needs of the increased enrollments. A case study by Pennsylvania State University, tracked 17 African country-universities that collaborated with universities in the US, in terms of teaching, service learning, and research with focus on advanced technology.

These partnerships were important for both sides as US institutions had emerging interest in collaborations on the continent and increased student travel, engagements. For African counterparts, they struggled with severe cuts to higher education with focus moving towards primary or basic education. Universities were also facing the impact of "brain drain." "This phenomenon had serious implications for developing countries in regards to retaining home-grown knowledge for the betterment of their own society(s)."¹³

The case study highlighted the following outcomes of the collaboration: 1) Systemic poverty issues and lack of reliable technical and communication infrastructure and connectivity at times hampered the ability to partner and collaborate. These systemic issues created a tension between partners in their approach to collaboration; 2) The participants acknowledged that with grant money being controlled by the university it was imperative to incentivize their African counterparts. They further acknowledged that without financial incentives their African counterparts misinterpret the partnership equality and limit full participation; 3) Lack of cultural understanding, different ways of working and socio-cultural impact. The ominous forces impacting African scholarship at universities provided a partial picture of the African reality relative to their position in partnerships with U.S. and European universities. Neoliberal economic policies in higher education, the impact of globalization on institutional change, the rampant brain drain, and lack of productive research and publishing—collectively put any partnership on unequal footing.

IV. Discussion

The outcomes in the case of each of these international collaborations with a US institution(s) and institutions in developing countries was a dissolution of the partnership. I did not seek to select three case studies with that conclusion, rather

¹³ Semali, L. M., Baker, R., & Freer, R. (2013). Multi-Institutional Partnerships for Higher Education in Africa: A Case Study of Assumptions of International Academic Collaboration. *International Journal Of Higher Education*, 2(2), 53-66.

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identified partnerships with a significant amount of available information and this happened to be the shared conclusion, which is perhaps indicative of the challenges facing these partnerships.

There are several common themes in these highlighted case studies, and seems to be common linkages across international university collaborations between US and developing countries.

- 1) First, these partnerships are set up without sufficient knowledge of culture, approach, and conditions in the universities, on both sides, leading to a sharp learning curve and poor communication.
- 2) There are programs and areas to connect but no clear mission about the desired goals for both partners, leading to either, one-sided partnerships or partnerships in which no one feels there was a benefit.
- 3) Improper and ineffective administrative support
- 4) Misaligned partners
- 5) Lack of deep assessment and collaboration before the partnership begins

Perhaps the most telling connection is that none of these partnerships was renewed and all are in various stages of dormancy.

V. Methods

I used a mix of methods to collect data for this paper, which included:

- Personal knowledge
- 1:1 Interviews of pre-defined stakeholders
- Literature review on specific case studies, as well as general review of available literature.

My goal in compiling and considering all of this data, was to define any over-lapping or re-occurring themes.

I then built on these to put forth a suggested Framework.

VI. Proposed Framework

Given the lessons learned from the above case studies and other research, and data available, as well as pulling from my own experiences, I put forth the following strategies required to lay the framework for an effective international collaboration in

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higher education between a US institution and one in a developing country, they are listed in order of importance.

Strategy 1: Clearly define goals and outcomes for both partners as presented by needs co-assessment, requiring significant dialogue.

Ninety percent of partnership stakeholders cited that a critical aspect of a successful partnership was the deliberate time and attention given to planning before implementation as it allowed for the development of effective and realistic goals for the project. This included having both partners write the grant proposal together, conducting needs assessments and observations at the host country institution, and engaging in consistent communication with stakeholders through planning meetings to develop partnership objectives

Thus, for some participants the dynamics between partners evolved over time and became more equitable and mutual. Yet, how partnerships were initially framed and set up appeared to dramatically impact stakeholder perceptions about their roles and capabilities at the onset of partnership engagement and management. This leader-follower tone, once established at the beginning of partnerships, appeared to maintain itself to some extent throughout.

This also brings to mind the feedback from a current MIT Professor who led a major international higher education collaboration. His main complaint was that there was a clear and major benefit to the university in this developing country, but that after all their work, MIT had nothing concrete to show for their success (that directly impacts the university). From my research for this paper, I now realize that from the beginning this partnership was asymmetric--with MIT providing all the capacity and delivering knowledge and the developing country receiving and implementing. While university consultancy may be a valid model to explore, this was not the goal of this initiative. I am sure if there was more work done at the beginning of the launch of this partnership, MIT would have been sure to outline what they consider success and to work collaboratively to ensure a two-way partnership.

Strategy 2: Define leadership structure (will point to best models) and involve faculty-staff either from X country or with a deep working knowledge of the culture.

In all of the reports and assessments of international higher education collaborations, challenges communicating across cultures and understanding facets of that culture were consistent. It was interesting to note that in the vast majority of cases it seems

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there is very little or no experience of either the US or the partner country on faculty or staff. In my experience, I have seen the importance of this from leadership to administrative levels. Perhaps major collaborations should not be launched if there is no in-country, or regional expertise available.

Strategy 3: Define multiples ways for on-going collaboration and exchange—in both directions.

Another consistent thread that helped to keep both collaborators in-tune with one another and help to ensure consistent and symmetrical outcomes was when there was frequent and organized activity. Partners seem to feel that cooperation and clear dialogue requires constant engagement, this also leads to a deeper understanding of culture and varying approaches.

Strategy 4: Define mechanism to share best practices.

There needs to be an open platform and research available to share best practices and lessons learned from these engagements. While each country and circumstance is vastly different, there are, as can be seen in these case studies, common threads. One way to do this, is to considering hiring a post-doc or graduate student to track the development of the process and provide an over of the project at its onset, high point of activities, and conclusion (if there is one planned). As more universities begin to do this, the taboo of failure and confusion in these collaborations will dissipate.

VII. Conclusion

Collaborations among international higher education partners are critical towards advancing knowledge, growing economies and solving the world's greatest challenges, though the collaborations themselves can also be fraught with difficulties, some minor, which can derail these important and ambitious goals. My hope is that using the suggested Framework, (which I anticipate will grow and change and more lessons are shared in the field) these partnerships can begin with a more successful framework for success.

Further, a main focus of my work was to put in action the lesson learned from research, and I have found that the Higher Education branch of J-WEL, where I work, was actually set-up with a framework very similar to what is suggested here. In fact, it was just determined that we should begin with co-assessments, which is completely in-line

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with my findings. This will create an exciting test ground for this Framework and I expect it to grow and evolve as my work at J-WEL and the field itself does so.