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An International Academic Partnership Through a Policy Implementation Lens: Top-Down, Bottom-Up or Somewhere In Between?

James D. Gieser
Western Carolina University, jdgieser@wcu.edu

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Abstract

Leaders of higher education institutions are eager to identify effective internationalization strategies in today's fast-paced, interconnected global environment. International academic partnerships are a common yet understudied strategy designed to take advantage of globalization's opportunities and to meet an institution's internationalization goals. However, because these are based squarely on human interpersonal relationships, they depend heavily on the perceptions, interpretations and appropriations of those involved. This study offers an in-depth exploration of how an international academic partnership is perceived and interpreted by stakeholders on both sides of the partnership. Guided by a policy implementation theory and a case study approach, the study's results yield a rich insider perspective on various facets of the partnership's origination, operation and perceived effectiveness. The study provides suggestions for future research as well as recommendations for practice, such as the critical function of faculty involvement and the exercise of prudence by senior administrators who possess international partnership ambitions.

AN INTERNATIONAL ACADEMIC PARTNERSHIP THROUGH A POLICY IMPLEMENTATION LENS: TOP-DOWN, BOTTOM-UP OR SOMEWHERE IN BETWEEN?

James D. Gieser[1]
Western Carolina University, USA

Introduction

The interconnectedness of people, ideas, and resources across distances and borders is nearly as old as humanity itself. Known as *globalization*, this process has exponentially quickened in recent decades impacting nearly every sector of society, including higher education. While this provides colleges and universities with new opportunities for student recruitment, student learning, faculty research and knowledge expansion, it also introduces new challenges to national and institutional plans and policies (Altbach, 2002; Dodds, 2008; Knight, 2011; Marginson, 2006). In the face of increasing opportunity and complexity, higher education institutions must rethink what they do and how they do it (Tubbeh & Williams, 2010).

Internationalization has come to define this response (Dodds, 2008; Gertel & Jacobo, 2010; McCarthy, 2007; Tubbeh & Williams, 2010). Altbach writes that internationalization "…refers to the specific policies and initiatives of individual academic institutions, systems, or countries that deal with global trends" (2002, p. 29). Globalization and its internationalization response are pushing the activities of higher education institutions across traditional boundaries and around the globe (Marginson, 2007).

This pursuit of more globally-connected campuses and globally-aware students has followed many roads, including the development of study abroad programs, international student recruitment, cross-cultural campus events and increased faculty involvement in cross-border relationships. Often underpinning these initiatives is the *international academic partnership* (Beerkens & Derwende, 2007; Knight, 2011; Tubbeh & Williams, 2010). Although various definitions of this phenomena have been formulated (Kinser & Green, 2009), for the purposes of this study an international academic partnership is a formal agreement between two cross-border universities that results in a joint vision and a set of shared programs, resources, and activities.

International academic partnerships have historically received less scholarly attention than the activities they enable, such as study abroad and faculty research collaboration. Recent edited volumes provide insight into the formation and management of international partnerships,

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[1] *Correspondence*: James D. Gieser, Western Carolina University; Cullowhee, NC 28723; Email: jdgieser@wcu.edu.

including their pitfalls and difficulties (Sakamoto & Chapman, 2011; Sutton & Obst, 2011). As Sutton and Obst assert, they are "…no longer simply one tactic of internationalization among many, but rather a core, driving philosophy" (p. xiii). If that is so, then much more empirical and evaluative research is needed (Knight, 2011; Sakamoto & Chapman, 2011).

International academic partnerships are commonly used to provide cross-border academic and service opportunities for students and faculty, an expanded global profile, and to create new sources of revenue (Coclanis & Strauss, 2010; Kreibernegg & Maierhofer, 2009; Tubbeh & Williams, 2010). However, institutional motivations are seldom explicit and their goals for a partnership may change over time (Delisle, 2009; Knight, 2011; Sakamoto & Chapman, 2011). Thus, conflicts may quickly arise (Jie, 2010). If partnership motivations are rarely clear and goals shift imperceptibly, causing conflict to make sudden appearances, it becomes vital to understand how the individuals involved shape its implementation and perceive its value.

The literature demonstrates that strong interpersonal relationships and the presence of a "champion" who constantly advocates for the partnership are vital (Austin & Foxcroft, 2011; Sakamoto & Chapman, 2011). However, this self-same human dimension introduces ambiguity and uncertainty. This component, critical at every stage from creation to implementation, must be more clearly understood. For example, if a champion is so central, does it matter *who* this is? Do partnership proposals put forth by, for example, an institutional president and a member of faculty stand the same chance of success?

Meanwhile, even as globalization provides new opportunities for action, institutional and individual action is always modified by the possibilities and constraints of local contexts, histories, and resources (Appadurai, 1996; Marginson, 2005). A partnership between universities is in reality based on relationships between persons situated at various levels of complex, multi-layered organizations, each of whom brings their own perspectives and experiences to bear on its operation. As Levinson, Sutton and Winstead (2009) argue, power and position influence agency and perception. International partnerships are formed when actors possess the requisite degrees of power and capital (economic, social and cultural) to make it so. And even then, those who are tasked with executing the partnership may not be the same as those who created it; they must simply follow orders handed down from above. How they interpret and negotiate their mandate matters. Their active support or lack thereof can have an impact on the quality of their work in relation to implementing the partnership's activities.

In order to understand these realities, this study explored the Center for Asian and Pacific Studies (CAPS), an international academic partnership between two prominent universities, Mideastern University (MU) in the United States and Australian Central University (ACU) in Australia (not their real names). The partnership was catalyzed by those at the top: the university's presidents were longtime friends and wanted their institutions to do something together. Its scope and content took shape as senior administrators and faculty were drawn into the conversation and eventually included a few specific Asian language courses, student exchanges, faculty exchanges, and regular symposia and workshops.

Given the background sketched above and the way in which this particular partnership began, the following research questions were formulated to guide the study:

1. *How is the implementation process shaped by the involvement of diverse actors situated across multiple institutional layers and contexts?*
2. *How do those tasked with implementing the partnership make sense of and appropriate the partnership in ways that are congruent and incongruent with its original purposes?*

The CAPS had been in operation for three years at the time of this study in 2012. The researcher visited both campuses, conducted personal interviews with seven individuals at MU and eleven at ACU, and analyzed partnership documents. Three years might be considered early in the life of any new partnership; with more time more development is certain to take place. Nevertheless, a study at this period can yield useful insights for administrators and faculty especially where new partnerships are being considered or just beginning.

The results provide a rich, ethnographic exploration of the contexts, people, and perspectives of an international academic partnership from the viewpoints of those tasked with its oversight and operation on both sides of the partnering institutions and at various administrative levels within them. Understanding the ways that multiple stakeholders and contexts interact to shape this process can help senior leadership, administrators and faculty develop a prudent approach to the formation and management of these important cross-border collaborations. Academic leaders need to know more about this important internationalization strategy in an era of increased opportunity, greater competition, shrinking financial resources and questions about the future role of higher education (Knight).

Conceptual Framework

Policy implementation theory forms the study's conceptual framework. Policy implementation research has typically focused on the implementation processes of state and federal education policies in the United States but offers novel insight into the functioning of international partnerships. Although a partnership between two universities is not the result of a policy *per se*, a reading of this partnership as a form and instantiation of the policy implementation process offers insight into various facets of the partnership, including how the partnership was established, how stakeholders at each level of the partnership understand its goals and objectives, and the various ways in which stakeholders make sense of and operationalize the partnership in congruent and incongruent ways.

Policy implementation theory has been divided roughly into three waves since its inception several decades ago: the "top-down" approach, the "bottom-up" approach and contemporary "sociocultural" approaches. This study utilized the conceptual lens provided by the sociocultural perspective. However, a brief review of the first two approaches provides context for its emergence.

The first wave of research privileged authority, hierarchy, and control in the implementation process (Gornitzka, Kogan, & Amaral, 2005; Levinson & Sutton, 2001; Levinson, Sutton, & Winstead, 2009; Matland, 1995; Rosen, 2009). The second wave self-consciously assumed a stance opposite to this first perspective. Referred to as the "bottom-up" perspective, this wave of research argued that the implementation process had little to do with power-holders at the top and in actuality happened at the micro-levels of institutions. Proponents of this perspective argued that in practice the implementation process depended more heavily on "street-level" actors than acknowledged by top-down researchers (Gornitzka, Kogan, & Amaral, 2005; Matland, 1995). This perspective sought to foreground the role of local actors, immediate contexts, and local conditions.

In the last decade, a third perspective has emerged that builds upon and expands the bottom-up approach. Sociocultural policy researchers emphasize and examine the multiple sociocultural realities that impinge upon the implementation process. This viewpoint makes the assumption that the implementation process will be powerfully and inevitably shaped by multiple actors who themselves are situated in a diversity of contexts and influenced by myriad concerns (Coburn & Stein, 2006; Honig, 2006; Levinson & Sutton, 2001; Levinson, Sutton, & Winstead,

2009; Spillane, Reiser, & Gomez, 2006). Communities of practice, for example, are seen to have a powerful if often tacit influence on how members perceive, interpret and negotiate all that they encounter (Coburn & Stein, 2006; Mill, 2006; Spillane, Reiser, & Gomez, 2006). Further, researchers using this approach are less likely to seek universal claims (Honig, 2006). Instead, their aim is to explore the various ways in which policies, people, and places interact in the implementation process, and to explore the results of these interactions.

Spillane, Reiser, and Gomez (2006) argue that making sense of and implementing policy requires individuals to draw on prior knowledge and experience. Because this process takes place within the individual, each actor will construct meaning in his/her own particular fashion, resulting in a plurality of meanings and interpretations. Moreover, actors do not live in isolation; they are embedded in multiple social and institutional contexts that powerfully influence their understanding. These communities of practice shape how individuals interpret and enact policy (Coburn & Stein, 2006; Spillane, Reiser, & Gomez, 2006).

Levinson and Sutton (2001) and Levinson, Sutton, and Winstead (2009) view the implementation process from a critical sociocultural perspective. Levinson, Sutton, and Winstead assert that policy is "…a complex, ongoing social practice of normative cultural production constituted by diverse actors across diverse contexts" (p. 770). Policies are not inert products but entail a dynamic interplay of perception and power. In addition, because implementation is ongoing and involves diverse actors, they authors also make a distinction between "authorized" and "unauthorized" policy. Authorized policy seeks to shape a normative behavior and discourse (Levinson, Sutton, & Winstead, 2009). It is not static. Rather, contrary to the desires of those who created it, authorized policy is "…constantly *negotiated* and reorganized in the ongoing flow of institutional life…" (p. 2, original emphasis). Thus policy is also *un*authorized; as it moves out of the executive suite and into its implementation phase it can develop in spontaneous, unexpected, and uncontrolled ways.

This conceptual perspective foregrounds the reality that the execution of an international partnership does not move in a straight line, top to bottom. Rather, once it leaves the executive suite it moves through a complex and multi-layered process to its execution on the ground. In the case of this study, an international partnership was created at the executive level of two universities and subsequently given over to others for its implementation. From the top-down perspective, if goals are made explicit enough and tasks are clear, the partnership should effectively move ahead without difficulty. In contrast, the bottom-up perspective asserts that the effectiveness of the partnership actually depends most heavily on those at the ground level who manage its day-to-day activities. Finally, the contemporary sociocultural perspective emphasizes that policy-as-mandated and policy-as-implemented may be markedly different things. Policy – or in this case, a partnership – does not travel in a straight line; implementation rarely occurs in neat sequential stages or according to plan. How do these factors play out in a real case? What is the structure of an international academic partnership as implemented, in action, and how do those involved negotiate and perceive the implementation process?

Research Design

This study was undertaken using a case study methodology and a social constructivist worldview. Taken together, these two components were well-suited to the study's aims. The former seeks to understand how people experience and make sense of a particular event, program, or phenomenon, whereas the latter assumes that individuals are active in the meaning-making process (Creswell, 2009; Schwandt, 2007; Stake, 2006). A case study expects to discover

multiple realities and perspectives. Similarly, social constructivism expects to discover multiple meanings that may differ from one individual to the next (Yin, 2003). The result is not a single, unified picture but a diversity of realities and, as Stake has noted, "Seldom will it be necessary to resolve contradictory or competing values" (p. vi).

Sample. The Center for Asian and Pacific Studies was selected for several reasons. First, the partnership had been in operation for only three years. Although not a long period of time, its relative youth was considered an asset: that the processes leading up to its creation and implementation would remain reasonably fresh in the minds of its stakeholders.

Second, the CAPS involved several common internationalization strategies: joint faculty research, curricular collaboration, and student study abroad exchanges. The Center also hosted an annual symposium that focused on the cultures and languages of the Asia-Pacific region. The importance of these strategies has been acknowledged in the literature. This study was interested in exploring the vehicle that undergirded them, namely, the interorganizational relationship between its two partner universities, or more pointedly, the perspectives and interpretations of key stakeholders situated in various positions within the institutions.

Third, the Center offered an interesting opportunity to explore a partnership that had developed at the highest levels of each university. It began because of a longstanding relationship between the presidents of Mideastern University and Australian Central University. The nature of the CAPS' origination provided an intriguing opportunity to examine what happens when decisions are taken at the executive level then handed down to others for implementation.

Finally, the CAPS was chosen because of personal relationships that had developed between the researcher, a student at Mideastern at the time of this study, and the Center's Mideastern-based administrators. This relational foundation resulted in special permission to make a detailed investigation of the partnership.

Participants. Data were collected and analyzed in 2012 and included document analysis, observations, and in-person interviews at both institutions. The researcher interviewed key stakeholders at both campuses, including one of the two presidents responsible for establishing the partnership; two vice presidents; five senior administrators; three deans; three members of the teaching faculty; and the four individuals tasked with directing the program (three of whom also held faculty positions). The researcher spent considerable time in informal dialog with the partnership's two co-directors and associate director. More details about the participants will be provided in the Methods section below.

Setting. The purpose of the partnership was manifested as the Center for Pacific and Asian Studies (CAPS) which was established in 2009. Its mandate was to "…foster scholarly endeavors, exchanges, academic programs, and collaboration on a broad range of issues related to Asia" (Report from Joan Young, CAPS co-director, to Vice President for International Affairs, July 11, 2011). This research confirmed that these activities indeed were happening in 2012, several years after the partnership's establishment.

Both Mideastern University (MU) and Australian Central University (ACU), the two universities of which the Center for Asian and Pacific Studies (CAPS) was a product, are amongst the leaders in their respective countries when it comes to international emphases. MU has a long history of international involvement. The university emerged as a key player in rebuilding European universities in the years following World War II. It has served that role in several other parts of the world since then. During this time MU emerged as one of the best

foreign language universities in the U.S., a status it retains today. MU also boasts high a percentage of international students and study abroad participation.

In spite of these strengths, Mideastern still is not necessarily a national brand name. Interestingly, it was Jennifer Thomas, the partnership's assistant director and an employee at MU, who expressed this view. Comparing MU to Australian Central University, she conjectured that ACU's global reputation was far greater. Thomas was not seeking "to knock MU" but explained,

> I think our reputation institutionally as a whole on world rankings is amazing given how many institutions there are. But it's nowhere near the strength of ACU. So I'm not sure that the value added to that relationship is particularly strong [in terms of] what MU brings, except in certain fields…

Although none of the other MU study participants discussed this point, Thomas's comment may hold a nugget of truth. MU was all too happy to link up with such a globally prestigious institution.

Founded in the mid-1900s, Australian Central University (ACU) was originally designed as a research-intensive institution for graduate work only but now includes a full array of undergraduate programs. ACU quickly climbed to the top of Australia's higher education rankings. It ranks highly in global schemes, as well.

However, ACU also had its own challenges to confront. Based on the ambitions expressed by several participants, the institution's leadership is eager to continue growing ACU's global reputation. As co-director Ben Williams noted, Australia's geographical location powerfully shapes the national psyche. "In Australia there is this idea that what we have always struggled against is the tyranny of distance, and that Australia is stuck down at the bottom of the world, an isolated continent with a relatively modest population, clinging to the habitable shores of what is in other respects a very tough, a very difficult place to scratch out a living." Given that reality, he says that institutions like ACU have always worked to become more connected and more visible on the global stage. So even if MU did not stack up equally in terms of global ranking or reputation, ACU perceived the linkage as a welcome bond to other parts of the world.

Ultimately, the partnership came about because of a longstanding friendship between the heads of the two institutions: President Howard Ferguson of Mideastern and Vice-Chancellor David Jackson of Australian Central University.

Methodology

Interviewees were selected based on snowball sampling. Initial, exploratory conversations began with Mideastern University's director of the partnership as well as its associate director, also located at MU. Additional interviewees were identified and invited to participate in the study based on suggestions and introductions made by these two individuals.

Semi-structured interview protocols guided each interview. Interview questions were based on findings drawn from prior partnership research and from policy implementation theory and were organized according to three broad themes, as follows: *people*, *partnership*, and *contexts*. The following list provides a sample of the topics explored in each interview: how the partnership was established and why; original goals and whether they had shifted over time; resources considered critical to its birth and functioning; benefits to the institution and to the interviewee him/herself; perception of opportunities for faculty (compared to senior

administrators) to initiate partnerships; how several "champions" of the partnership influenced its operation and image on campus; impact on the partnership, whether perceived or real, when several figures critical to its beginning left to take up positions elsewhere. Protocols were semi-structured and probes were utilized to allow the researcher to follow up on comments suggestive of potentially interesting further content.

Interviewees were arranged into four levels in order to systematize the study and to provide initial frames of analysis. These levels were as follows: *executive*, *senior administrative*, *program administrative*, and *operational*. A basic identification of interviewees at each level is provided below:

1. *Executive*: President/Vice-Chancellor of each institution
2. *Senior administrative*: Administrators who led institutional international affairs; directors with oversight of institutional international academic partnerships
3. *Program administrative*: Two directors of the Center for Asian and Pacific Studies, one at each respective institution, and one associate director located at MU
4. *Operational*: Faculty who taught the partnership's courses

The study participants were organized as follows:

Australian Central University

Name*	Level in the organization
David Jackson	Executive (now retired)
Nathan Hall	Senior administrative
Paul Kelley	Senior administrative
Steven Morris	Senior administrative
Karin O'Rourke	Senior administrative
Matthew Sorenson	Senior administrative
Tom Abbott	Program administrative
Natalie Davis	Program administrative
Ben Williams	Program administrative
Henry Green	Program administrative/operational
Raymond Legowo	Operational

Mideastern University

Name*	Level in the organization
Howard Ferguson**	Executive
Simon Roberts	Senior administrative
Victor Smith	Senior administrative
Peter Dodson	Program administrative
Jennifer Thomas	Program administrative
Joan Young	Program administrative
Allen Bernthal	Program administrative/operational
Malika Suliman	Operational

*Pseudonyms
**Ferguson was not available to take part in the study

The interviews were recorded and selectively transcribed for analysis. Categories were created according to the study's research questions and literature review and analyzed via immersion analysis, an approach by which the researcher spends lengths of time immersed in the data using his interpretive skills to identify patterns "evident in the setting and expressed by participants" (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). Categories were assessed for their plausibility (Marshall & Rossman, 1999), then data within each category were evaluated for their salience in telling the story of the case. Qualitative data analysis is by nature an interpretative activity (Merriam, 2001; Stake, 2010). This is especially so in a case study, which focuses on the experiences and interpretations of those involved in the phenomenon as well as the researcher's interpretations of interviewees' representations (Stake, 2010).

It must be kept in mind that the aim of the case study method is not to uncover a single, unified answer to the research questions (Stake, 2006). It is expected that multiple realities may arise. These must be retained in the analysis and reporting process. One of the primary goals for reporting case study research is to develop a thick description of the phenomenon for its readers (Merriam, 2001; Rubin & Rubin, 1995). This means that the researcher must become very well acquainted with the phenomenon and its participants (Stake, 2010). The development of a thick description also requires that special attention be given to the multiple realities and contexts of the case. Creating a rich, descriptive narrative that conveys the contexts of the phenomenon and the views of its participants is critical in order to help readers understand what is going on (Creswell, 2009; Merriam, 2001; Stake, 2010). The researcher aimed to follow these guidelines in writing up the findings of this study.

Trustworthiness and Limitations

In qualitative research, the researcher serves as the primary data collection and analytical instrument (Merriam, 2001). Therefore, analysis and conclusions can be indirectly influenced by the individual conducting the research. The author was aware of this reality and acknowledges its potential impact on the results. What is deemed important and how these interpretations are presented are inevitably impacted by the researcher and his/her own sense of what is occurring (Stake, 2006).

Several steps were taken to ensure the trustworthiness of the study, including triangulation, member checking, coding of interview data and awareness of researcher bias (Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Merriam, 2001; Stake, 2010; Yin, 2003). The goal was not to reconcile any and all contradictions that arose during analysis. Their presence simply indicates that multiple perspectives exist and suggests that further work is needed to clarify understanding. Case study research does not minimize such contradictions; they are a vital part of the phenomenon (Stake, 2006).

A limitation of the study is the nature of the two institutions involved. Mideastern University and Australian Central University enjoy all the resources and benefits that globalization in the 21st century can provide. They operate within very stable, affluent nations, possess the best internet and communications technology and enjoy strong international reputations in their respective countries. Relatively speaking, it is a partnership between equals. A study examining a partnership that included an institution from the majority world would surely uncover other realities at work.

The aim of case study research is to contribute to knowledge in the conceptual (rather than the statistical) sense (Merriam, 2001; Stake, 2006). Thus, generalizability of findings is not the goal of case study research (Yin, 2003). Even so, valuable lessons can be learned and new

knowledge gained by examining a particular case in detail. Each international partnership in higher education will contain features that make it unique, while at the same time possessing elements in common with many others. This case was examined not in hopes of discovering representative truths about all international partnerships. Rather, the study adds new insight to the field.

Finally, students were not sampled in this study. This study was interested in the experiences of the administrators and faculty who were tasked with and shaped the Center's implementation. However, future research on an international partnership of this kind should include student participants, which would surely provide additional insight into the nature of such phenomena.

To protect participants' identities, pseudonyms have been created for the institutions, the partnership, and the individuals involved in the study.

Findings

The Center for Asian and Pacific Studies had a special beginning: it had its start at the top. Each interviewee told similar versions of the story. As the story goes, Jackson of ACU and Ferguson of MU were enjoying a nice dinner at a meeting in Beijing and began to discuss how their institutions might fruitfully partner together. They knew and trusted each other; could they find a way to further their respective missions by joining forces in some way? With this idea in hand they returned to their respective universities. After discussions with other top administrators and senior faculty and an analysis of each institution's strengths and weaknesses, they identified a focus: the languages and cultures of Southeast Asia and the Pacific. The partnership would be called the Center for Asian and Pacific Studies.

Because the partnership had begun in this way, it was viewed by interviewees as the presidents' special project. Those tasked with leading the CAPS knew that participation in it could not be coerced from others. They had to participate because of their own desire to do so. Meanwhile, several administrators and faculty at the lowest level of the partnership felt that it existed because of the presidents' involvement; had the idea begun at the grassroots faculty level, it might never have seen the light of day. One even wondered: if the partnership were to disappear tomorrow, would anyone even notice? He didn't think so.

Position and Power Impact Perception. Perceptions of the partnership seemed to depend at least in part on the interviewee's position and power in the university. Almost uniformly, those holding senior administrative positions spoke positively, even glowingly, about how the partnership's purpose and effectiveness. Others expressed differing views.

The individuals at the bottom, or operational, level of the partnership knew that they possessed little power or influence: this rested in the hands of those at the top where it had all begun. Whereas some felt that they had been "invited" to participate in the partnership's operation, others felt forced. As one of Australian Central University's co-directors of the partnership, Henry Green, intoned, "So basically, they said we got to collaborate. Then they flicked it down the chain. We just are handed this thing and told, 'Go work with these guys'."

This is not to say that those at the upper echelons of the universities intended to be demanding or dictatorial. In interviews they expressed their belief that nothing could be demanded of faculty and that anything originating at the top was doomed to failure if others in the institution did not become genuinely involved in the process. Senior administrators were well aware that the involvement, or lack thereof, of the academic staff would significantly shape the development of the Center. All of them agreed in interviews that a command-and-control

approach was ineffectual. If everyone felt as Green did, the partnership stood little chance of success.

ACU's Vice President of International Affairs, Matthew Sorenson, was cognizant of this reality. He noted, "So international strategies are nothing without buy-in from the academic staff. Because they are the ones doing the work, they are the ones who actually do the research and who teach the students." Those like Sorenson had power but expressed an attitude of humility, or simple shrewdness, about how to get others involved.

Seeing the necessity of involving those at the grassroots level was one thing: building that support was another. Ben Williams, one of the Center's co-directors at ACU, explained, "Because of the other responsibilities and obligations that those who work as academic staff in universities will have, you can't insist on them doing things like this." This was exactly how Green had felt: that the partnership had been "insisted on" from above.

This tension between top-down and bottom-up realities was expressed by several stakeholders. In fact, Co-Director Williams admitted that academic staff often responded to presidential initiatives with cynicism, as intoned by Green above. Williams explained,

> Perhaps there would be a sense among some… [that MU President] Ferguson and [ACU President] Jackson made this out of thin air because they were mates. Why is it we should, at our level among the academic staff, be pursuing something that suited their purposes at a particular moment in time? Why would we invest ourselves in something that came from on high?

Nathan Hall, a senior international administrator at Australian Central University, also addressed this tension. Just because those at the top had power did not mean they could push their ideas onto the backs of unwilling faculty. He explained,

> But it is a real balancing issue for any university I think to try and balance…the strategic vision of the leadership of the university with focusing on key relationships, and with the bottom-up stuff where the researchers really want to work with people they met at a conference on their particular topic... And you can't not let that happen [sic]. Trying to find the right way to adjust so that both of those things can happen is the key trick.

The CAPS had its beginning because of decisions taken by those at the very top of the institutional hierarchies and arguably came to fruition because they possessed the authority to make it happen. All believed that this was how it happened. Some viewed this process with cynicism; others felt that complex, cross-border relationships like the CAPS simply had to begin somewhere, somehow. As ACU's co-director Williams stated, "…there is never going to be a cross-campus link-up that is a perfect fit for everyone. Because frankly, within our own university you don't have perfect link-ups. That is life in big, complicated organizations that are constantly responding to broader social, economic, and political changes. And I see something like the Center for Asian and Pacific Studies as enmeshed in those changes." Williams felt that such was the case with the CAPS; for those lower in the organization, it became a matter of whether or not they would choose to become involved.

At the same time, administrators at both universities knew that central authority and power were not the sole factors to consider. Rather, they were aware that the partnership's

implementation depended on the contribution and participation of other administrators and academic staff. It was the abilities and knowledge of lower-level stakeholders and their willingness to oversee and execute the program that ultimately made it a reality. Even if it began at the institution's height, the partnership would fall flat without their participation in the initiative and their sincere efforts to make it work.

Perception is Reality. Contemporary policy implementation researchers examine how interactions between particular policies, people, and contexts produce particular outcomes, and how those outcomes are achieved. There are multiple influences that are bound to exist in the implementation process, both within and outside the institution.

In this study, the Center for Asian and Pacific Studies was bounded and shaped by larger national and institutional contexts on both sides of the partnership. Both Mideastern University and Australian Central University had unique histories that shaped their institutional goals, values and cultures. For example, the presidents' and other academics involved came to realize certain academic gaps that the other partner could fill. One institution was weak in Southeast Asian studies but strong in the Central Asia region, whereas the other was well known for its Southeast Asian focus and wanted to supplement its weakness in Central Asia. The partnership was seen to increase each institution's stature within the global higher education landscape.

Peter Dodson, Director of International Partnerships at Mideastern, explained, "So that was the basic genesis of the idea…of doing something where we're kind of combining, you know, where they're strong and where we're strong and then trying to do something new and unique. It really fit." These institutional contexts were foundational to the birth of the partnership. Multiple interviewees used the term "strategic" when speaking about the purpose of the CAPS; they felt it filled specific institutional gaps and for that reason wanted it to be a success.

As alluded above, the increasingly competitive national and global higher education environments were another factor. Stakeholders on both sides of the partnership felt the need to expand their university's prominence on the global stage. The CAPS was interpreted in light of this perception. The explanation offered by Mideastern's co-director of the partnership, Joan Young, was representative of her colleagues' views. She said,

> I think universities in general always want to partner with high-level and reputable institutions that are at least of their level or higher, so ACU also fits that. They're highly ranked and it's a very, very wonderful global institution. And so…to be able to benefit from their resources is something we're all very happy about.

Such considerations, however, may hold less meaning as one descends below the senior administrative levels of the institution. National and international prestige were mentioned less often amongst the academic staff involved in the CAPS. They had other things on their minds.

Allen Bernthal was a professor in MU's Asian Studies Department. He noted that faculty were not always willing participants in partnerships that had originated above them. The reason, he explained, is rooted in the simple fact that academic faculty are not infinitely expendable beings; they cannot do everything. Bernthal felt that administrators were often guilty of believing that a university, and therefore its faculty, *ought* to cover every conceivable topic under the sun. The more initiatives for faculty to run after, the better. In Bernthal's words, "Not really; it doesn't really work that way."

Steven Morris, a Dean Australian Central University, agreed. Coining an intriguing phrase, he explained that "academic self-interestedness" was a central factor in the flourishing – or fading – of international partnerships. He explained,

> I'm mostly poli[tical]-sci[ence] background – sort of a materialist bent – so I tend to look at incentive effects. And I tend to see self-interested individuals, whether it is [ACU co-director] Ben Williams or [MU's President] Ferguson. They are out there doing their best, doing what they are employed to do... And then they see opportunities, and then they see things that are just fun, just exciting, a bit different from the regular… I think [personal interests] make a big difference.

Morris focused on the individual. Before a faculty member gets involved in a partnership, they must first see how it will serve their academic and research interests. The "academic self-interested" individual will buy in only insofar as their participation promises some kind of pay out for them.

Natalie Davis, a department director at ACU, echoed Morris' insight. She speculated that a partnership had to offer academic staff clear opportunities to advance their personal academic agendas. It would surely wilt without that crucial ingredient. She explained,

> So my experience with these international joint ventures is that a lot of them fall by the wayside… [I]t is the intangible benefits that drive them forward, but the intangible benefits are delivered to specific individuals, rather than to the institution in the abstract. And so you've really got to have stakeholders and people who feel that it is worthwhile continuing to reinvest in the relationships. And absent that, I think the relationships dissolve or calcify pretty fast.

Whatever the "authorized" purpose of the partnership, these stakeholders had their own interpretations. Morris identified personal interests as a key driver. MU's Dodson point to its strategic intent, while Co-Director Young noted the prestige it provided especially to Mideastern. There existed a multiplicity of interpretations, not necessarily in conflict and each legitimate based on the individual's point of view.

While varied, the stakeholders above provided a generally positive perspective of the CAPS. Others diverged significantly. In specific, two faculty members who took part in the Center on the ground level, teaching its courses and mentoring exchange students, questioned its very existence. Raymond Legowo, an ACU lecturer in foreign languages, felt that "institutionally it is pretty weak." He participated in the Center as a language lecturer, teaching foreign languages to MU students via a live video linkage. Legowo said that he participated because he loved to teach language to students, but he felt the partnership did not add much value to his institution.

Henry Green also offered a dim interpretation of the partnership's usefulness, this despite his role as one of the CAPS's co-directors at ACU. He said that his primary passion was teaching in the classroom. Green cared because he wanted to serve the students in the Center's courses. But other than that, he did not see reason to become excited. To him, the Center had simply been "flicked down the chain." He wondered about its importance to and longevity at the institution. "So if it stopped tomorrow," he said, "probably nobody would notice. That is a bit damning, isn't

it, from our point of view?" Green's interpretation marks a stark contrast compared to the glowing views of others in the study.

Meanwhile, even though the Center had begun with an "authorized" set of aims and outcomes, its implementation had taken an "unauthorized" turn as it moved through human minds and hands. The CAPS' associate director, Jennifer Thomas, shared how she had redirected some of the Center's funds in ways that were not exactly congruent with the partnership's stated purposes but which she felt matched its *spirit*. Thomas explained how this use of funds was incongruent with the original plan. However, she explained that doing so made certain activities possible that otherwise might not have occurred. Although unanticipated and *un*authorized, this appropriative action on Thomas's part actually increased the partnership's effectiveness.

Discussion and Recommendations

The sociocultural perspective foregrounds a fascinating truth: In order for the Center to become a reality, it had to literally travel *through* human beings. These individuals acted to shape the partnership's execution and were themselves shaped by various communities of practice. These tacit systems of doing, being and understanding served as filtering mechanisms of how the Center's goals and activities were interpreted and organized. Thomas's use of funds, for example, was an act of *appropriation*, or "…creative interpretive practice," of the original MOU (Levinson, Sutton, & Winstead, 2009, p. 767). From Thomas's viewpoint above, her use of funds was legitimate even if not explicitly within the authorized bounds.

It is perhaps stating the obvious that the implementation process for an international academic partnership, especially one as multifaceted as the Center for Asian and Pacific Studies, is powerfully shaped by its stakeholders, from senior executives at the top to those tasked with its implementation at the bottom. As one might expect, interviewees' interpretations of the partnership differed widely. There wasn't a single, "authorized" viewpoint or company line. Some felt that the Center was "good" and "meaningful" (Sorenson; Roberts) or called it an outright "success" (Thomas; Morris; Sorenson). Others believed that the partnership was "mostly coronation," "window-dressing" and possibly just "decorative" (Green; Legowo; Morris).

Given such divergent perspectives, one might wonder whether we were discussing two entirely different things. How could stakeholders express such disparate points of view? Certainly many factors were at play here, such as the impact of communities of practice, stakeholders' past experiences and current constraints, how they viewed initiatives or "policies" handed down by the president, and what they thought of the other partner. These factors (and more no doubt) played into how they made sense of the partnership (Mill, 2006; Spillane, Reiser, & Gomez, 2006). It bears repeating that stakeholders' views were most likely formulated in unconscious and taken-for-granted ways. That is to say, no one stopped in the middle of the interview to conduct a detailed, soul-searching analysis of the many influences shaping their understanding. In contrast, internal and external influences shape perception in powerful and often unconscious ways (Gee, 1996).

Higher education institutions are increasingly making the formation of international academic partnerships a priority (Sutton & Obst, 2001), as Mideastern and Australian Central had done in forming the CAPS. It is therefore critical to focus more scholarly attention on how they work. For example, research could yield more insight into the role of authority and power and the multiple influences that stakeholders bring to bear on every aspect of the partnering process (Coburn & Stein, 2006; Spillane, Reiser, & Gomez, 2006). Results of this study suggest that stakeholders' views of an international partnership will depend in part on their position and

power within the university's hierarchy. Whether academic faculty sense an invitation versus a push to get behind a presidential initiative may influence the alacrity with which they do so. Greater understanding on this point can help administrators and institutional leaders approach the process with care and avoid the pitfalls of naïveté or unexamined assumptions.

This study suggests many lines of inquiry that invite further pursuit. For example, how do stakeholders interpret and make sense of the partnership's aims and objectives? In what ways do they implement the partnership's activities in both authorized and *un*authorized ways (Levinson, Sutton, & Winstead, 2009)? What degree of "control" should be placed on the partnership's resources and activities? In this study, results suggest that space should be given for unauthorized appropriations of the partnership. A degree of freedom here may result in serendipitous activities and outcomes to arise, even if they were originally unplanned.

The literature notes the importance of "campus champions" in the birth and flourishing of an international partnership (Amey, 2010; Austin & Foxcroft, 2001; Kuchinke, 2011; Lacy & Wade 2011; Sakamoto & Chapman, 2011). The Center for Asian and Pacific Studies (CAPS) had several clear champions, including the university's two presidents as well as the academic faculty members who stepped into the co-director roles at each institution. Many interviewees noted the important role these individuals played in helping to bring the partnership to life. This reality raises an important question: what happens when the campus champion is not the university's leader, but a rank-and-file member of the faculty? Based on this study, it seems clear that *who* the campus champion is may be one of the most important factors shaping the scope and impact of a partnership on campus.

Regardless of whether the partnership begins at the top or grows upwards from the bottom, genuine interpersonal relationships of trust and commitment must be present (Baker, 2011; Coclanis & Strauss, 2010; Tedrow & Mabokela, 2007; Kreibernegg & Maierhofer, 2009; Shull, 2011). Faculty involvement is especially critical (Asgary & Thamhain, 2011; Baker, 2011; Brustein, 2007; Dewey & Duff, 2009; Harrell & Hinkley, 2011; Hoffman, 2009). The president, vice presidents and senior administrators interviewed for this study clearly understood the crucial role that faculty played in the partnership's flourishing. Academic faculty will not automatically accept directives mandating their participation. In fact, as a Dean at MU attested, they may actively resist them or simply decide not to become involved. As reported in the findings of this study, more than one faculty member interpreted the CAPS – an initiative from above – with a degree of cynicism. The executives and administrative participants knew that without faculty support the partnership stood little chance of success.

If the faculty interviewed in this research are correct, then this finding suggests that senior administrators may need to tone down international ambitions that do not have a solid cadre of faculty in support. A sure way to involve faculty is to begin where strong, established faculty relationships with colleagues abroad already exist (Asgary & Thamhain, 2011; Kuchinke, 2011).

Conclusion

International partnerships are unique entities that differ one from the next. Yet given their growing importance as an internationalization strategy, it is crucial to gain a clearer understanding of how stakeholders shape the implementation process. International partnerships are enlivened by human interaction yet also made more complicated because of them. Power and position matter (Levinson, Sutton, & Winstead, 2009). Although the road to effective

international academic partnerships is fraught with unexpected twists and turns, they offer great promise in the pursuit of more internationalized and globally-connected campuses.

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About Author
    James Gieser, EdD, is the Study Abroad Advisor at Western Carolina University. He has worked in international education in South Africa and Germany; studied abroad in Thailand and Australia; and developed international academic partnerships for a leadership training program in Africa and Asia. His research interests include leadership and organizational change, internationalization of higher education, and the study abroad experience. He earned his BA from Wheaton College (IL), MA from Wheaton College (IL), MPhil from the University of Cape Town (South Africa), and EdD from Indiana University.