Administration of an Innovative Program of International Cooperation: Success Across the Pond

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Abstract

The world continues to change rapidly and globalization is fostering common social, economic, and political agreements among countries. Agreements by governments have created opportunities to enhance educational and research endeavors that, by design, will remove barriers that previously have limited the flow of students, educators, researchers, and professionals across borders. Global access has opened the door to mobility in higher education, encouraging the development of educational standards and mutual mechanisms of recognition. Three years ago an eight-institution consortium comprised of four American and four European institutions of higher learning came together in a partnership to provide opportunities for students and faculty to share the educational and research experience internationally. A partnership of this magnitude was constructed despite barriers that were both administrative and cultural in origin. Through a positive approach, a framework for a transatlantic program of educational and research cooperation was developed. A significant level of mutual cooperation effectively solved the administrative hurdles initially encountered in the realm of research. We believe a model has been created that fosters the development of international programs to benefit faculty, students, and research administrators as they work to effectively interact in the global environment.

Key Words: Research administration, international education, study abroad

Introduction

The world is rapidly changing, and globalization is helping to establish common social, economic, and political agreements between countries, as evidenced by the 1993 Maastricht Agreement that created the European Union (EU) and the 1994 North American Free Trade Agreement between the United States, Canada, and Mexico. These agreements provide the context and rationale for government involvement in enhancing educational opportunities and removing barriers that limit the flow of students, educators, professionals, practices, and projects across borders. Having opened the doors to North

American and European mobility in higher education, this increased global activity has encouraged the development of common education standards and mechanisms for mutual recognition, and liberated processes by which professionals are permitted to practice. For example, the educational ministries within the EU have mandated through the Bologna Declaration that by 2010 all educational curricula, course syllabi, textbooks, and related materials must be identical within the EU countries. This means that whether an institution is educating an architect or a zoologist, the educational methodology will be identical to its counterpart institutions' programs throughout the EU. Therefore, this Declaration has been designed not just to lower barriers, but to remove them entirely.

These barriers also exist in the U. S. They are generated by responding to the criteria for specific academic curricula that in many cases are imposed, or at the very least influenced by accreditation agencies, certification bodies, ministries of education and health, and licensure laws, because education and training can differ from state to state and country to country. These barriers will create unique challenges for higher education in the U.S. as our graduates try to stay competitive in the global economy. Thus, global mobility of students has now been recognized as an important component of the educational experience to help address concerns related to differences — not just to the academics in a particular curriculum, but more importantly to help facilitate a better understanding in culture among the peoples of these countries.

An integrated effort to help promote the joint collaboration between higher educational institutions within the United States and the EU has been in place for several years based upon a treaty of mutual cooperation. The origin of this cooperation in education and training dates from the Transatlantic Declaration on EU-U.S. relations adopted in November 1990. In 1993, a two-year exploratory phase of cooperation was launched, and the experience gained provided the basis for a formal EU-U.S. Cooperation Agreement signed in June 1993. Since that time a total of 107 transatlantic consortia have been funded involving 726 European and U.S. institutions of higher education and vocational training. More than 4,000 U.S. and EU students have completed portions of their programs of study abroad within these consortia projects.

To enhance the cultural awareness of students while removing their academic, research and practice differences across borders, three years ago an international consortium comprised of four American and four European institutions of higher learning united to establish a mutual student exchange program (Table 1).

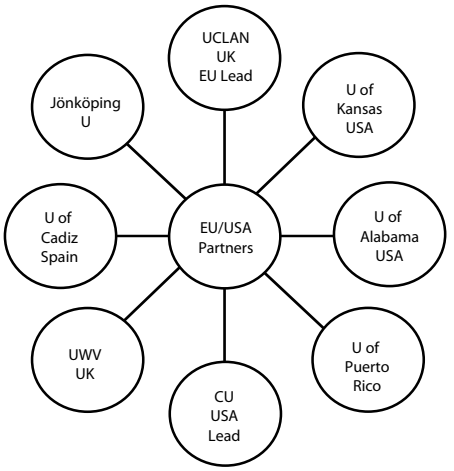
Table 1

Institutions Comprising the Transatlantic Health Science Consortium

United States of America	European Union
Clemson University, U.S., Lead	University of Central Lancashire, UK, Lead
University of Alabama, Birmingham	University of Wolverhampton, UK
University of Kansas	Jönköping University, Sweden
University of Puerto Rico	University of Cadiz, Spain

The integration of the eight institutions is diagrammed in Figure 1.The Consortium agreed to target biomedical science as the initial academic area of focus, with interest in other areas to be identified following the matriculation of the consortium program. This partnership has now been extended to programs in behavioral science and business.

Figure 1.
Illustration of the Transatlantic Model for Clinical/Biomedical Sciences.



From the perspective of the research administration office, a program of this scope focusing on international cooperation creates unique challenges. Obligatory components such as memoranda of understanding (MOU) and sub-contractual agreements are potential hurdles that must be overcome to provide the necessary instruments for the ultimate success of the project. There is also the potential challenge of overcoming language barriers. This article describes those challenges and how they were addressed to best serve both the individual institutions and, importantly, the students who participated in the international study abroad exchange program.

Importance of International Education

These are challenging times in which we live. We have embarked on the 21st century like no other time in human history. Life changes almost daily, as reading the newspaper or listening to the evening network news can attest. A list of these changes, by no means complete, gives us an idea of their scope and effect on our daily lives. Changes to our economy, education, environment, livelihood, health, natural and non-renewable resources, nations and people are profound in their impact on how we will live in the future.

We in higher education are not immune to these changes. In representing institutions of higher learning, we have been governed by the simple fact that our role and responsibility is to educate students. This remains the basic core value in our mission statements; however, what has changed and will continue to change is the climate and environment within which our students will enter the job force of the future. The challenge of higher education today and tomorrow is to make sure that our graduates leave our institutions not just with the necessary knowledge in their respective disciplines required to become successful, but more importantly, the necessary skills to live and work in a global economy.

To achieve this combined success, educational institutions will need to change the way they meet their mission. To address this challenge, we must ensure that our curricula become internationalized, thus providing our students all the necessary skills to become as marketable as possible as they seek to enter the international work force.

How can this be accomplished? We must internationalize the curriculum to emphasize the importance of the study abroad experience for our students. This valuable experience allows students to learn a portion of their area of study while sitting next to their host country classmates in the foreign site. This allows our students to hone the skills necessary to survive in the international setting, whether survival is defined as simply being able to communicate or, more complexly, to sustain a livelihood. Importantly, these interactions allow the visiting student the opportunity to learn more about the history, culture, and language of the host country.

International education and the opportunity to study abroad allow students to broaden their horizons and think beyond their own individual area of influence. For the institution, internationally focused education and curriculum bring added value to the overall experience (Gallicchio, 1993). We must provide the best education and training possible for our students if they are to become successful competitors in the global community. If we fail, we will have negatively impacted our graduates' ability to be the best possible adults.

International experience as part of an educational system is imperative – program by program — to the interest and commitment of participating institutions. To be successful, there must be adequate and effective communication among specific groups, all of which share a strong belief in blending the international education experience into their educational programs. Administrators, faculty and, most important of all, students are the essential components for success of any such program.

Focus on the Academics—Role of Research in International Education

Over the years, the role of research and scholarly activity has been a hallmark of American higher education, in many cases attracting foreign students to study in the U.S. However, in several areas of U.S. higher education, especially within the health professions, a focus on conducting research has not been emphasized. In several areas, specifically clinical laboratory and biomedical science, an increase in the performance of research by faculty over the last decades has gained significant importance (Covey & Burke, 1987; Bruhn, 1987). This increased effort arose in reaction to criticism that academic programs within the health professions have been deficient in their commitment to conduct scientific and scholarly activities. It also has been noted that those few programs conducting research or sponsored activity received little or no recognition. (Karni & Waller, 1999) It is essential in today's health care environment that health professions' faculty initiate and conduct research and scholarly activity. In addition to their mission of contributing to the improvement and delivery of health care, research and scholarly activity fulfills the responsibility of building the knowledge base of the individual academic disciplines (Syed, 1991). The criteria to evaluate colleges and schools of health professions have for too long highlighted the following deficiencies: (a) historically, members of health professions' faculty/staff have achieved academic ranks and tenure without the rigors of having to demonstrate scholarly productivity on a level with what is expected of faculty/staff members in other schools

and colleges on the same campus; (b) the majority of the faculty/staff within these units have a weak track-record of capturing external grant funding for research; and (c) the school or college does not have graduate programs. (Kraemer & Lyons, 1989; Waller, et al., 1988) The important points to emphasize in the performance of scholarly activity are research, graduate education, and the provision of research opportunities to faculty and students. Academic programs that incorporate international collaborations have been effective instruments in achieving research excellence (Gallicchio, Kirk & Birch, 1998).

Focus on Administrators

Leadership is the key role for administrators in programs incorporating international collaborations. Opportunities for the promotion of collaboration can be either interdisciplinary or inter-institutional. When the possibilities to develop programs of this nature are identified, it is critically important to have administrators in place who both support and believe in what is trying to be accomplished. Without the cooperation and advocacy of the appropriate administrators, more often than not, such projects become very difficult, if not impossible, to implement. It is particularly important for the appropriate administrators to view first-hand the international site, including the classrooms, laboratories, clinical facilities, and dormitory facilities where students will be housed. Administrators must also make sure programmatic areas of emphasis are within the overall institutional goals and objectives. In some cases this can be referred to as a strategic plan. Because administrators are required to sign off on documents essential to implementing study abroad programs, e.g., memoranda of understanding (MOU), having them in the loop as early as possible can avoid delays at best and rejection at worst when review of these programs becomes necessary.

Focus on Faculty

The importance of international opportunities for academic faculty and staff can be significant. International programs can provide faculty with access to students capable of conducting research, who would not otherwise have been available within the program, department, school, or college. . The faculty member also gains skills in the supervision of sponsored student research programs, skills they may not have had previously. This aspect of the program is important because it allows for the direct interaction of the faculty member in the supervision of students.

The criteria to evaluate health professions' faculty for too long have focused on the following issues: (a) historically, health professions' faculty have achieved academic ranks and tenure without having to demonstrate scholarly productivity on a level comparable with other university faculty; (b) the majority of health professions' faculty within these units historically had a weak track-record of capturing external grant funding for research; and (c) there existed a lack of graduate programs within the schools or colleges of health professions; therefore, a climate that fosters the development of researchers performed by researchers was absent. These issues have clearly re-defined the academic role of health professionals' faculty in today's academic environment that clearly demonstrates the performance of scholarly activity as defined by research, graduate education, and the provision of research opportunities to faculty and students. (Kraemer & Lyons, 1989; Waller, et al., 1988)

One method to increase research and scholarly collaborative activity is through the use of cooperative interactions between faculty from different schools or colleges. This collaboration can be regional, national

or international. Collaborative research incorporates the use and participation of multiple investigators, usually each with a defined role and purpose in the objectives of the project. An additional advantage of collaborative efforts is that they can be either interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary.

Focus on Students

The opportunities for students, whether undergraduate or graduate, to engage in generating scholarly activity in health professions have been limited or non-existent. An international consortium to promote the exchange of students in clinical laboratory and biomedical science was organized to provide educational opportunities to advance the knowledge base of participating students. This program afforded students the opportunity to both exchange ideas and become involved in educational partnerships and research collaborations (Hope-Kearns, Gallicchio & Ward-Cook, 2004).

The Role of the Research Administrator

The performance of sponsored research requires the cooperation of a team of skilled individuals. The obvious lead member of this team is the principal investigator (PI). Not so obvious are research administrators, who typically work behind the scenes, often hidden from the limelight. . Research administrators are responsible for reviewing and processing pre-award proposals, maintaining post-award research accounts, and overseeing various aspects of compliance (e.g., research involving the use of human subjects, animals, and biological or chemical hazardous agents).

Often collaborative projects among faculties of different institutions (whether they are focused or involved in research and/or education) are conducted under complex arrangements. When conducted under sponsored research, these collaborations are usually performed under sub-recipient agreements that require careful preparation and review by a skilled grant administrator. These agreements must cover the objectives of the project while following the sponsored agency and institutional guidelines.

The Transatlantic Health Science Consortium Experience

The Transatlantic Health Science Consortium (THSC) has succeeded by overcoming several initial obstacles that, if not resolved, would have made its implementation difficult if not impossible.

First, the MOU was an important document required by the sponsoring agency and the participating institutions. The MOU determined the exact conditions under which the program was to be conducted. It specified such terms as academic credit, accommodation/housing, tuition, and general rules pertaining to the conduct and performance of the international student enrolled in the host country institution. Each institutional grant researcher had input in the formation of the MOU, and the role of the grant administrator was critical.

The MOU also highlighted language differences among the collaborators. One of the EU partners, the University of Cadiz, mandated that the document be translated in Spanish. Another EU partner, Jönköping University, did not require a Swedish translation because all of its administration and faculty were fluent in English. In fact, Jönköping University's biomedical science curriculum is taught in English.

Second, the sub-recipient agreement served to describe the project in terms of funding and implementation. Each lead institution by definition of the sponsoring agency was the recipient of the total funding, respectively. However, in the absence of a sub-recipient agreement, the allocation of funds for each of the participating partner

institutions could not be provided. The research administrator was instrumental in ensuring the success of the project by incorporating specific institutional policy into these agreements.

Third, the project required a renewal sub-recipient agreement for each of the three years the grant was funded. Each year submission of a project scope list was required. This was a list provided by each of the project site institutions detailing what they planned to accomplish over the next 12 months and how their funding would accomplish these goals. Research administration viewed this list as mandatory; otherwise the sub-recipient agreement for that particular institution would not be validated for that year, resulting in a lack of funds.

Fourth, the project required an annual progress assessment, which also included a financial statement pertaining to the allocation of funding for the previous year and how this funding was spent. Research administration facilitated the process of collecting and validating this information to the sponsor's satisfaction.

In the final analysis, research administrators played a critical role in the overall grant process. In addition to providing the proper project oversight required by the sponsoring agency, they also ensured that institutional policies and procedures were followed during the performance of the project. As more of their time became devoted to compliance issues such as these, research administrators continued to serve as important members of the team.

The Future

The United States has long been engaged in an aggressive competition for international students. For years, international students came to the U.S. to be educated and to gain experience by making active contributions to their respected field of study. Many of the best and brightest international students who were once totally committed to study in the U.S. are now studying elsewhere or staying at home. This change has evolved in part since 9/11. Changes in policy mandated by the Departments of Education, Homeland Security, and State have altered the ability of international students and scholars to pursue the opportunity to study in the U.S. Although the circumstances that created these changes are understandable, the overall long-term consequences and eventual impact on the ability of the U.S. to maintain its leadership in many academic areas and research are now in jeopardy. A concerted effort must be made by both policy makers and educators to work together to re-establish the U.S. as the place for international students to be educated. In so doing, important contributions are made to American society as these students go on to become active members of the global community.

Thus, it will continue to be through education and research that we will be allowed to return to the forefront in providing opportunities for international students. The consortium described in this report is an example of a new strategy for international program development. The focus for the future pursues a more ambitious aim of implementing joint or dual transatlantic undergraduate degrees within a smaller consortium. This is based on the rationale that the growing pace of global interconnectedness in virtually all aspects of human life means our post-secondary institutions must rethink how best to prepare students for a lifetime of work in an international environment, i.e., "the world is getting flat" (Friedman, 2005). In doing so, the EU and U.S. governments intend to support collaborative projects that can

contribute to innovation and the acquisition of skills required for meeting the challenges of the global knowledge-based economy. Those most successful colleges and universities in the future will increasingly define themselves as truly international in terms of their educational activities and the demographic profile of their faculty and students. While the research community has to a larger extent embraced the global dimension, as reflected in broad and intensive international collaborative activity, the study and teaching dimensions of higher education still have to address this challenge in a truly international perspective. In the EU-U.S. context the next aim is to address this challenge by developing and testing a new and more integrated form of international education: transatlantic joint degrees. This innovative initiative will undoubtedly create new challenges for research administration in order to allow the colleges and universities that select this high ground to succeed.

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