

# Intentionality in International Engagement: Identifying Potential Strategic International Partnerships

by Tim Barnes

As with many public research universities across the United States and around the world, at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign we are reexamining our efforts at international engagement. We have worked to more clearly articulate our goals and desired outcomes, more carefully consider our modes and models of collaborating with partner institutions abroad, and more creatively imagine the ways in which our efforts at international engagement can be thoroughly integrated into our core institutional missions. Such self-examination seems inevitable, and not without value, during these times of ever diminishing dollars in public funding for higher education. We are all seeking to do more with less, and to leverage any resources we may have to maximum advantage.

In fact, to suggest that we are “reexamining” our international engagement efforts may be somewhat disingenuous, as it implies that we as an institution previously had approached interactions with the world with some measure of deliberation and coordination. I would suggest that, to date, our university’s international engagement has been largely *incidental*, in that our activities have grown organically, based on the particular interests and efforts of individual faculty, research groups, or academic units. I suspect that we are not alone among our peer institutions in relying almost exclusively on this decentralized approach; nor are we alone in taking initial steps toward a more strategic, or *intentional*, approach to internationalization.

The incidental model of international engagement is obviously of great value—individual faculty, research groups, and academic departments are in the best position to identify international partnerships that can answer their immediate needs and enhance their particular research and educational activities. The result is a large number of highly specialized and often short-lived collaborations, of the sort aptly characterized by Susan Buck Sutton as “transactional” relationships, with institutions abroad. Yet, by its very nature, this incidental model all but precludes any sort of long-range, strategic planning for international engagement at the institutional level. Strategic international engagement, whatever the particular model employed, must rely on deliberation, coordinated implementation, and quantifiable assessment for its success. In short, it must be intentional, rather than incidental.

The emerging Strategic International Partnerships initiative at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign is a first step toward such intentionality. We seek to identify peer institutions around the world that, for various reasons including geographic location, historic collaborations, and current synergies or complementarities in our research and educational priorities, offer particularly strong opportunities for institutional collaborations that are both broadly and deeply impactful. In conjunction with this identification process, we are working to develop administrative structures, budget forecasts, and funding models that can provide the necessary “start-up” support for developing new strategic partnerships, and gain support for these new partnerships from our central campus leadership.

## Defining the “strategic” in strategic international partnerships

Having an ambitious, clearly articulated goal for this new model of strategic international partnership is a critical first step, akin to the vision statement that informs a good strategic plan. We concluded that strategic international partnerships should be distinguished from our traditional, focused partnerships based on five key criteria:

- *Breadth of impact.* Strategic international partnerships should be broadly impactful on two fronts. First, they should cross discipline, college, and department boundaries to involve faculty and

students at all levels, and from throughout the institution. Ideally, they should foster true inter-disciplinarity in research and in learning. Second, they should involve activities directly related to all of the institution's core missions (for example, research, education, engagement, economic development).

- *Depth of impact.* Strategic international partnerships should provide opportunities to move from simple to complex interactions between institutions. With regard to research, this might range from specific collaborative research projects, short-term exchanges of research personnel, and shared physical plant resources, to ongoing "laboratories without borders" and jointly-managed, offsite physical research facilities. Likewise, educational activities should run the gamut from simple reciprocal study abroad arrangements and short-term study abroad programming to 3+2 and sandwich programs, jointly taught courses, co-development of new curricula, and joint or dual degree programs.
- *Strong faculty support.* While some central coordination of activities in a strategic international partnership is necessary and desirable, there must be significant and ongoing interest among faculty across the campus if any meaningful collaboration is to develop. Identify key individual faculty at both partner institutions to spearhead the initial efforts and champion the partnership among their colleagues. Alumni of one institution who are working at the other can be strong advocates, particularly if they are alumni of Ph.D. programs, as the research relationships forged during their doctoral studies will often continue in their professional careers. However identified, these faculty coordinators and advocates should be recognized by the central campus administration for their efforts to promote the emerging strategic partnership.
- *Demonstrable mutual benefit.* Strategic international partnerships must offer ongoing mutual benefits to both institutions. They should add value to both institutions involved by increasing their capacity to do cutting edge research, providing unique educational opportunities for their students, opening new funding streams, leveraging existing and creating new corporate relations, and enhancing their brand names and recognition around the world. Such benefits need not be financial, or even tangible, but they should be measurable and demonstrable. As with any strategic planning exercise, metrics for success should be developed, along with baseline and future goal levels for these metrics. Some of these may include numbers of students and faculty directly participating in the partnership, increased student diversity and inclusion of demographic groups traditionally underserved in international education, numbers of joint grant proposals and funded joint research awards, co-authored publications in peer-reviewed journals or presentations at national and international scholarly conferences, and joint patent applications.
- *Sustainability.* Successful strategic international partnerships will evolve over time. The various collaborative activities undertaken should eventually be self-sustaining. Collaborative research should continue through external funding, ideally from sources that are available because of the partnership. Cooperative educational activities should be sustained by fees assessed to the participants, paired where possible with potential subsidies by government direct financial aid programs, student mobility grants, or foundation and donor scholarships. Initial investments by the central administrative leadership at the partner institutions should come in the form of seed funding to facilitate initial interactions between faculty and international education administrators at the partner institutions. This central financial support should scale down over the first five years or so, as the institutional relationship matures; it can then be shifted to support other emerging strategic partnerships.

### **Identifying potential strategic partners**

Having established goals and expectations for this new model of strategic international partnership, we can look toward identifying partners. We can do this by taking two distinct but related inventories.

First, we should consider the various modes and models of international collaboration that have been employed across our campus. These various collaborative activities can be catalogued based on the core missions of the institution. Thus we consider the various types of collaborative research activities and faculty mobility programs; study abroad, student exchange, and cooperative education programs; outreach initiatives through institutional development, capacity building, and professional training programs, as well as community outreach activities of area studies centers; and corporate partnerships and relationships with strong international components. We identify activities and programs that have been sustained over time, and those that were short-lived, with an eye toward discerning the key factors in their long-term success or failure.

Next, we should review our current and recent past portfolio of international partnerships. Here we consider the various types of institutions with which we have partnered, the typical length and outcomes of these partnerships, the geographic distribution of the partner institutions, and the number of disciplines/departments, faculty, and students participating in collaborative activities within the partnerships. The goal of these reviews is a set of criteria to be used in identifying potential strategic partners. These criteria will vary from one institution to another, based on particular institutional strategic plans, core missions and values, and current priorities and foci. Characteristics of strong potential partners for strategic collaboration should align with the criteria proposed above, for defining a strategic partnership more generally. They may include:

- *Similar scope of activities.* Potential partners should be relative peer institutions, similarly focused or comprehensive in their research and educational programs, with at least some shared strengths, as well as some complementary strengths in particular disciplines.
- *Historical and existing connections.* A survey of past interactions between potential strategic partners will often reveal surprisingly long, if sometimes sporadic, relationships.
- *Mutual interest and commitment.* The central administrations of potential partners should be equally vested in developing a strategic partnership, and willing to allocate relatively equal amounts of human and financial resources to ensure the partnership's success.
- *Compatible administrative structures.* The international offices at the partner institutions must be similarly responsive and proactive in advocating for the emerging strategic partnership.
- *Faculty connections.* Without significant faculty interest and support, the partnership has little chance of success. Initially, these connections can be fostered by holding joint seminars to bring groups of faculty together. Funding travel to enable 15 or 20 key faculty from each side to spend two or three days together, introducing one another to their research, can be fruitful.
- *Student interest.* The study abroad administrators at potential partner institutions should gauge the level of interest among their students in studying abroad at their particular locales.
- *Potential for consortial activities.* Strong candidates for potential strategic partnerships will often share other institutional partners in common, providing a facilitated path for developing consortia of institutions with shared collaborative activities. This can be particularly valuable today, when national and transnational government organizations (such as the EU Commission) have developed funding programs specifically aimed at supporting consortia of three or more institutions.
- *Potential for thematic focus.* In addition to considering the geographic distribution of a portfolio of strategic international partnerships, it may be useful to consider focusing particular strategic partnerships on specific themes. These themes should be multi-disciplinary and inclusive enough to maintain a breadth of activities, but they can often focus the attention of both students and faculty who otherwise might not naturally seek to engage with the partner.

- *Logistics and practical considerations.* Do the academic calendars of the potential partners correspond sufficiently? Are there sufficient language competencies among both students and faculty to make collaboration practical? Is the time difference between the locations of partner institutions conducive or prohibitive for synchronous distance learning/interactions? Is the difference in cost of living between the locations prohibitive for student mobility? Are there safety and risk management concerns?

## **Conclusion**

Defining our concept of strategic international partnerships, and then identifying potential candidates for such partnerships, is central in moving toward intentionality in our international engagements. The specific definitions and identifying criteria can and should vary from institution to institution. The successful strategic partnership profile for a small, private, liberal arts college will look different from that of a large, public research university. But the end goals will likely be similar. We seek to build broad, deep, lasting relationships with true peer institutions around the world. We look for partnerships that infuse all aspects of our institutional cultures and inform all of our core missions and values. We strive for flexible, organic linkages that are responsive to the changing needs, priorities, and opportunities of both the partner institutions and the constituents they serve.

It is a commonplace among international education administrators to speak of the transformative nature of international experiences in the lives of our students and faculty. Thoughtful, deliberate, and strategic international partnerships are a means of scaling this transformation up to the level of the institution as a whole. The ideal of a truly transnational university, conducting research that addresses complex global problems and preparing students to be good global citizens and stewards, is within reach. Intentionality in institutional engagement can be a valuable means of attaining that lofty goal.