

Big Ambitions for Student Learning: Potentials of International Partnership

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Tags

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Setting

Central Coast College (CCC) is a mid-size public college located in a scenic area mid-way between large cities. It is not walking distance from a town, and college-life, especially for international students, is centered very much in the campus community itself. As a smaller college, staff and faculty know each other by first names and students who make a mark in any sphere are widely known and recognized throughout the community. International students are made to feel welcome by the community as a whole. The public colleges in this state are closely networked and collaborative. International partnerships abound, typically originating from the interest and collaboration of individual faculty members. Some have taken root and been adopted across many departments with the regular care and feeding of the international office. These institution-wide partnerships often entail fruitful collaborations between international office staff and faculty who have a shared vision for student engagement, learning, and development.

One particularly ambitious vision arose from Business faculty connections between the state colleges and colleagues at two universities abroad. The students from all four institutions would converge, form a cohort, and move from one institution to another each term. The objective was for students to not only gain facility in cross-border culture and business practices but also to form bonds that would be the foundation of a professional network extending throughout their individual careers.

Case

CCC's new International Office Director arrived on campus in early September to a warm welcome from office staff, deans, and Student Services offices. One of the director's first discoveries was a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) for a new 4-way international partnership that would enroll the first students in the coming spring term. Both the original faculty member and former International Office Director who planned the program had since left the college. Implementation of this exchange would be up to the new director, with one Business professor who had been aware of the initial planning. This innovative program had been awarded grant funding to cover the student participation costs. The other institutions already had students selected, and Central Coast College was to be the host of this first term.

The International Office Director sprang into action, solidifying a strong working relationship with the faculty member. Together they identified the immediate steps to be taken and the director-initiated coordination with departments around the college including academic affairs, student services, registrar's services, financial services, and housing services. Then they reached out to colleagues at the other participating state college and to the two international institutions. Frequent conference calls ensued for joint planning, and a series of face-to-face meetings began with the better-funded international delegations visiting periodically. The whole team was excited about this unique learning and career development opportunity being offered to their students, and confidence and respect levels were high. That turned out to be a very good thing because the implementation required considerable further cooperation.

Arrangements for the Central Coast College International Director to complete that Fall term:

- Recruitment of first year CCC Business majors to participate. Because the program required students to make a full two-year commitment and the international institutions had three-year degree programs, students would need to make the decision to participate almost immediately after learning the program was available. That proved a hard sell and only two students signed up though the cohort design had called for six.
- Housing had to be provided for each of the incoming students. While the tuition exchange itself had been arranged before signing the MOU, accommodation fee payment had not. CCC's housing office had a tight budget, which meant lobbying and negotiation to secure rooms for the term.
- The Business department course and staff assignment planning had not taken into account that 12 to 18 additional students would all need identical courses in that particular term. The Dean's Office needed to be convinced that the course schedule changes were necessary.

Somehow, the arrangements were made. The 14 visiting students came (six each from the international institutions and two from the other state college). The International Office made them all feel welcome with the traditional receptions and field trips, and the students excelled and were appreciated by faculty. That first term on CCC's campus ended happily.

The following term the students proceeded to the other state college, and from there to each of the international institutions in turn. The international office received periodic reports from students, and it was clear they were all

making the most of their experience at each different institution. However, there was no time to rest for the CCC's International Office.

- The International Office Director had been designated the grant's coordinator for CCC, with responsibility for data tracking and periodic report writing. In addition to financial and activity reporting, this required identifying and purchasing a learning assessment instrument to measure the start and completion point of each student's learning in the program.
- There was more recruiting to be done! The grant had funded three full rounds of the two-year program, with another cohort scheduled to be launched each spring term, each one starting at CCC. Recruiting qualified first-year students through announcements and information sessions proved less successful than before. The second spring term came with no CCC students participating, only one from the other state college, and full contingents of six students each from the international institutions. The third year proved similar.
- Meanwhile the first cohort was nearing the completion of their program and degree audits were underway. The Director learned that the intended joint degrees committed in the MOU for each student had not been approved by the Board of Trustees. The International Programs Director lobbied the Provost's Office and the Registrar. Eventually dual degrees were granted instead.

The international participants returned to campus with faculty from their institutions to walk across CCC's stage in their American caps and gowns. Many of the first cohort stayed on for the wedding of two of their members. It was clear that the cohort bond envisioned at the conception of the exchange was being realized. However, the second and third cohorts dwindled in number, and the program ceased when the grant money ran out after 3 years.

Discussion Questions

As you consider this case, discuss:

- Collaboration between the director and the faculty member was key to launching this program. What are some of the barriers the International Office might have encountered if the director had attempted the interdepartmental negotiation alone?
- Internal relationship building was critical to securing classes, housing, and transcripts for students in this exchange. Now that these collaborative relationships have been built, how might the International Office work with these same campus departments to make other beneficial arrangements for international and study abroad students?
- The intended learning and career preparation outcomes of the program model appeared to be met in the initial years. What are features that can contribute to these outcomes and the strong bonds formed by the student cohorts?
- What methods would you use to assess this program? What data would you collect? What research questions would you focus on? Who would you share the results with, and for what purposes?

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- The complexity of this program required considerable time and effort by the International Director. What questions does this raise about grant-funding and sustainable program design? What are some ways that colleges and universities might aim to support grant-funded programs after the external money runs out?
- Was this partnership successful? What are examples of other programs or shared initiatives among these four universities that might be built on this foundation?