

Paving Purposeful Partnerships: Designing and Implementing Transnational Dual and Joint Degree Programs

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Tags

Education Abroad; Ethics, Equity, and Social Justice; International Enrollment Management; Internationalization and Global Learning; Leadership and Strategy; Management and Operations; Partnerships; Program Design; Student Learning and Development; University/Higher Education

Setting

Whitmore University, a small liberal arts institution in the United States, has a mission to cultivate global citizenship and foster intercultural learning. Study abroad, language immersion, and faculty-led international research are core components of the curriculum, and international students comprise a large proportion of the student body.

The Provost and international education leadership at Whitmore seek to expand international partnerships and offer students innovative academic pathways. Universidad de Castilla, a mid-sized public university in Spain and long-time study abroad partner, has proposed a dual Bachelor's degree in International Studies, in which students would spend two years at each institution and receive degrees from both. Students would complete core requirements at their home institution before transferring to the partner university for advanced coursework.

Case

Whitmore University stakeholders must make a decision about whether or not to enter into a transnational bachelor's degree partnership with Universidad de Castilla. Leaders at both institutions see great potential in the collaboration. Whitmore students would earn an international credential and gain access to a larger public university in Europe, while Castilla students would receive a U.S. credential from a respected liberal arts institution. Both institutions anticipate that the dual degree will enhance global branding and broaden recruitment pipelines.

Nonetheless, Whitmore faculty voice concern that Castilla's curriculum, while rigorous in International Relations, may not fully align with the liberal arts requirements at Whitmore. Maintaining academic standards is an institutional priority. Faculty also worry that advising responsibilities will increase as they help students to navigate two different curricular systems.

Admissions and registrar staff raise operational questions. How will GPA be calculated across two grading systems? How will course equivalencies and transfer credits be determined? Which institution will issue diplomas, and how will transcripts show both degrees? Without clear policies, staff warn that students could face confusion or misrepresentation of their academic achievements.

Students respond with mixed feelings. Some are excited about the possibility of studying in two countries and earning two degrees. Others are concerned about affordability, the applicability of financial aid abroad, credit transfer, and time to graduation. Some students wonder whether holding two bachelor's degrees would enhance career or graduate school opportunities. Preliminary surveys suggest stronger demand from Castilla students than from Whitmore students, raising questions about mobility balance.

Looking at broader implications, complicating factors and questions are numerous. Will U.S.-Spain political relations change in the upcoming years to affect program viability? How can the program be designed to benefit all students, not just financially advantaged students? Does a dual degree program reinforce the liberal arts mission, or could it dilute institutional identity?

The Provost views the dual degree program as a strategic opportunity to demonstrate Whitmore's commitment to global learning and enhance institutional prestige. Trustees, however, worry about reputational risk. If Universidad de Castilla were later perceived as lower quality, how might this affect Whitmore? Castilla leadership has its own priorities, expecting Whitmore to recruit actively and market the program enthusiastically.

After six months of deliberations, the Provost and Whitmore's Academic Affairs Council must make a final decision, should Whitmore proceed with the dual degree program, and if so, under what conditions? Stakeholders must balance visionary goals, such as international prestige, global learning, and expanded student opportunity, with practical considerations, including curriculum alignment, operational feasibility, workload, equity, and financial constraints.

Discussion Questions

As you consider this case, discuss:

- What are the major advantages and potential challenges to joint and dual degree programs?
- What are traits of successful joint and dual degree programs?
- What governance structures or agreements (e.g., memoranda of understanding, curriculum committees) are needed to manage these transnational partnerships effectively?
- Are there ethical concerns about the proposed dual degree structure in this case?
- From a student perspective, does the opportunity to earn two degrees from two universities in two countries outweigh the challenges of such a program?
- Would inbound and outbound student mobility be balanced in a partnership such as this, and if not, how should differences be addressed?
- If Whitmore goes forward with the partnership, how could staff and faculty concerns about curriculum alignment and operations be managed while still supporting innovation and internationalization?
- Thinking about this case in its entirety, do you recommend that Whitmore move forward with the partnership? Why or why not?
- How might the equation change when discussing a dual MA, PhD, online, or any other transnational degree partnership? Would certain countries or academic fields pose unique challenges?