

Virginia Commonwealth University

Office of International Education

International Partnership (IP) Initiative

Introduction

Virginia Commonwealth University is committed to the internationalization of its campuses, faculty and students in Richmond and abroad. In 2006, VCU implemented a new approach to conducting international collaborations: establishing a set number of University-wide partnerships with Universities in strategically selected countries. This initiative responds directly to Theme III, Initiative 10 of VCU 2020 Strategic Plan: *Initiate strong and mutually reinforcing interdisciplinary research and training relationships with carefully selected sister institutions . . . that expand opportunities for faculty, graduate students and postdoctoral fellows and that provide opportunities for international exchanges of student and faculty scholars with VCU.* Recognizing that within US Higher Education, long-established approaches to signing international Memoranda of Understanding and Agreements tended to focus on and be limited to a specific faculty member's interests, VCU has opted for an approach that aims to create for the University at-large, in-depth partnerships to enhance its research, teaching and service missions. The partnerships are institutional in scope and designed to be developed as long-term relationships. The Universities were selected in part due to a record of successful collaborations with VCU but more importantly due to the matching quality and diversity of academic and research programs on both campuses. Like VCU, a number of our partnership Universities have been ranked among the top 500 Universities in the world.¹ Following recommendations of the faculty, staff and students serving on VCU's Global Presence Committee for the VCU 2020 Strategic Plan and the identification of internationalization as a Presidential Priority, in February, 2006 the VCU Board of Visitors approved resources dedicated to support research and undergraduate and graduate curricula initiatives with partner universities; dedicated, permanent annual funding for the International Partnership Initiative was allocated to the VCU Office of International Education. These funds are to be matched by VCU Deans whose role in planning and evaluation becomes essential to ensure that International Partnership activities further advance the mission and goals of their academic units.

Scope and Nature of International Partnerships

As to be expected, International Partnership activities include student and faculty exchanges. However, the new approach goes beyond exchanges to promote the teaching and research collaborations that create long-term linkages through joint and dual curricula as well as on-going research projects. Long-term success will be built upon that

¹The annual Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU) begun in 2003 by Shanghai Jiao Tong University has consistently ranked VCU among the top 150-200 academic universities in the world. ARWU also ranks VCU as one of the Top 100 North & Latin American Universities for the past three years. In 2006, VCU is placed in the top 70-87 best universities.

<http://ed.sjtu.edu.cn/ranking2006.htm>

the ties developed between faculty, departments, and schools. In contrast to collaborations that rely on individual faculty connections, which tend to disappear over time if the faculty member changes career paths, the International Partnership Initiative helps ensure that bi-lateral educational programs, faculty & student exchanges and joint research programs remain active, long-term and continue despite faculty turnover. The development of an “institutionalized” relationship with our identified Partnership Universities may take a variety of paths dependant on the degree to which a match of institutional expertise exists; to which there are compatible educational/research matches, the efficiency with which collegial relationships are established, etc. The sustainability of Partnerships will ultimately depend on the breadth and depth of faculty/unit/department/school engagement which in turn will support, promote and sustain the engagement of students in educational and scholarly programs.

Management of International Partnerships

All International Partnerships are coordinated and managed through the Office of International Education (the VCU School of the Arts in Qatar, a cross-borders degree program, is administered through the VCU School of the Arts). The Executive Director of VCU International Education oversees the Initiative, working closely with academic Deans and the Council of Partnership Directors to develop long-term planning and priorities. The Council of Partnership Directors assembles the directors of each of VCU’s partner universities and is responsible for developing the university’s yearly plan for partnership activities. The partnership director serves as the primary link between the two institutions and provides stewardship in developing the vision and plans for collaboration. Partnership directors consult with faculty, chairs and deans to identify unit priorities, explore possible projects, recruit appropriate faculty and orchestrate project development. They lead in hosting visiting delegations as well as coordinating outgoing VCU delegations to their partnership campus. Partnership directors are faculty members proficient in the language and culture of the university who are committed to the internationalization of VCU. When a directorship becomes vacant, the Council solicits nominations for qualified candidates, reviews applications and makes recommendations to the executive director of International Education.

Development and Support of International Partnership Activities

While the genesis of a particular Partnership follows multiple models, a common strategy for the evolution of Partnerships was envisioned as a progressive engagement of individuals leading to faculty-initiated activities within the Partnership framework supported in part by funding from the Partnership Initiative. The interest, initiative and commitment of individual faculty members is essential to the the Initiative and is to be sought out and encouraged. An important function of the academic Deans and the Council of International Partnerships is to determine the best fit for individual proposals within the broader context of IP and academic unit goals, resulting in a guided approach to selectively partnering units and individuals that will likely hold the greatest prospect for success.

In the early days of the Partnership Initiative, the “guided” approach was the predominant model. “Guided” refers to initial contacts at either a senior administrative level or engaging Program Directors to identify specific areas where Partnership activities have a high potential for success, followed by the establishment of School/College/Department level contacts to more fully explore the prospect for development at a “local” level. Institutional objectives and target outcomes helped inform these “guided” interactions. As the Partnership Initiatives became better understood throughout the VCU community, a transition to a “faculty-driven” genesis of activities took place. A formal process for the evaluation of proposals was established.

Support for departments and schools that propose and develop institutional projects combining teaching, curricular and/or research between VCU and partner Universities (including but not limited to joint/dual degree programs, research centers of excellence as well as one partner bringing to another’s campus specialized programs) is coordinated by the Office of International Education.

To submit a proposal for funding support for an IP activity, one or more faculty members use a standard form that specifies the type of activity, the participants, the expected outcomes, measures for success and the amount of funding requested. Signatures of support are needed from the Department Chair and Academic Dean to ensure the proposal is consistent with unit priorities and will receive matching support. The proposal is then reviewed by the Council of Partnership Directors which makes a recommendation for funding support. Final approval is given by the Vice-Provost for International Affairs and the Provost.

Since the development of the International Partnerships represents a significant investment by the institution, expenditures are directed to the achievement of the long-term goals of the Partnership Program as outlined in the document “International Partnership Objectives and Outcomes”. Overall, the goal is to institutionalize the Partnership with a given partner university by progressively creating a network of activities across multiple units of both institutions which become embedded in the culture of departments and programs.