Chapter 4.11
E–Collaboration for Internationalizing U.S. Higher Education Institutions

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INTRODUCTION

The current globalization wake requires countries to cope with their deficiencies in international competencies to become credible political actors and sustained economic players (Stiglitz, 2003). They must develop expertise on foreign policies, emphasize functional knowledge, and make concerted efforts to narrow technological gaps to successfully unleash global competitiveness (McGrew, 2005). There is a high correlation between the level of global competence acquired by U.S. students during their undergraduate and graduate education and the success of the country as a key international player (American Council of Education, 1995). U.S. higher education institutions are compelled to increase their stature by constantly seeking ways to expand their network of partnerships with foreign counterparts. Any steps into that direction will broaden and strengthen the internationalization of their curriculum to facilitate and improve students' understanding of the world.

According to the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges (2001), U.S. institutions of higher learning need a major transformation of their governance structures around international issues. Among the most urgent changes are advances in information technology, shifting focus of education from teaching to learning, increased competition from corporate, for-profit institutions, and the creation of online educational enterprises (Green & Olson, 2003). Within that context and given that physical distance is a constant component in international relations, electronic technologies prove critical for U.S. higher education institutions to establish an efficient and effective communication flow with foreign academic entities. It becomes then pertinent to explore the role of electronic collaboration (e-collaboration) and its impact in the internationalization process, from initial contacts to subsequent agreement negotiations.

BACKGROUND

Developing international programs implies fostering globally oriented campuses with an emphasis on students and faculty (Olson, Green, & Hill, 2005). International programs units are the primary organizational cells responsible for internationalizing higher education institutions. Within those units, chief international officers are in charge of facilitating institutional linkages. They have university-wide responsibility for establishing agreements and coordinating activities with foreign counterparts. In particular, they (a) encourage the development of new programs and enhance existing ones, (b) assist students interested in expanding their education abroad and faculty eager to teach awarding credit courses at cross-border institutions, and (c) develop visiting scholar programs in which faculty from affiliated institutions spend much longer time on teaching or research assignments. Once agreements begin to materialize, university presidents committed to the international scene need to place a higher priority on enhancing strategic partnerships that allow their institutions to become internationally competent entities (Summers, 2002).

Understanding e-collaboration is critical to achieve a desirable level of global competitiveness. E-collaboration is generally understood as communication established by different individuals through the use of computer or non-computer electronic technologies to accomplish a common task (Kock & Nosek, 2004). Typical examples of e-collaboration technologies involve the use of computer-mediated communication over the internet or other computer network infrastructures and also non-computer electronic technologies such as telephones or teleconferencing suites (Kock & Hantulla, 2005). E-collaboration tasks with an international focus address issues ranging from securing tight alliances to setting up informal working relationships in order to foster academic competencies. These types of e-collaboration allow engagement with foreign institutions of

higher education to better prepare students to function within an interdependent and integrated economy. Therefore, e-collaboration in its many forms plays a key role in determining the extent to which these relationships among educational organizations are nurtured.

EXPLORING E-COLLABORATION

A comprehensive analysis of the components of e-collaboration is provided by Kock (2005). He discusses six main conceptual elements to identify the nature of an e-collaboration episode. They are: the collaborative task, the e-collaboration technology, the individuals involved in the collaborative task, their mental schemes, and the physical as well as social environments that surround them. It becomes then relevant to explore the extent to which these accepted criteria of e-collaboration manifest themselves in the internationalization process being sought out by the U.S. higher education community.

The Collaborative Task

The international task in which e-collaboration is mostly used is the creation of documents that describe the terms of cooperation among institutions. These documents are called letters of intent or affiliation agreements with foreign academic institutions, professional associations, scientific communities, non-governmental organizations, private businesses, or government entities. In Klasek's (1992) words, they are the formal testimony to the history of the relationship, identify initial areas of common interest, and serve as a basis for additional cooperative programs in various disciplines. Once completed, a related task comes along by which memoranda of understanding are conducted to outline specific implementation stages and provide transparency to the relationship. These documents bond institutions together and spell out the different clauses

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