

Sustainability in U.S.-China Higher Education Collaborations: The Case of GUFÉ-WMU Joint Institute

Yuqian “Yvonne” Zhang^{a*}

^a*Western Michigan University, USA*

*Corresponding author: Email: yuqian.zhang@wmich.edu.

Address: Western Michigan University, Michigan, USA

ABSTRACT

U.S. and Chinese universities have engaged in four decades of collaboration since the late 1970s, but these partnerships are subject to potentially irregular forces. Only long-term sustainable partnerships have the potential to develop into reciprocal relationships that establish “negotiated space” around cultural differences. This paper utilizes a qualitative single case study design to explore the factors contributing to the long-term sustainability of U.S.-China higher education partnerships. The findings indicate that a set of essential enablers must be in place to foster long-term and sustainable global partnerships: Leadership, faculty and staff engagement, and policy support. International partnerships must be responsive to the changing needs of the students, faculty, and administrators and to external political, economic, and ideological factors. Critical to the

sustainability of any long-term partnership is a shared commitment by both institutions.

Keywords: China, collaboration, higher education, partnership, sustainability, U.S.

INTRODUCTION

U.S. and Chinese universities have engaged in four decades of collaboration since the late 1970s (He, 2012; Julius & Leventhal, 2014), with China serving as the largest source of international students (Institute of International Education, 2020) and the top partner country in international joint and dual degree programs (Helms et al., 2017; Lin, 2016b) for U.S. universities. Additionally, the U.S. and China are each other's top collaborating countries in science and engineering publications (National Science Board & National Science Foundation, 2019).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Kinser and Green (2009) define international partnerships as “cooperative agreements between a higher education institution and another distinct organization to coordinate activities, share resources, or divide responsibilities related to a specific project or goal” (p. 4). These institutional collaborations have rapidly expanded in number and importance in the past two decades (Lanford, 2021; Lin, 2016a). This trend might be considered “*the internationalization of internationalization*,” signaling that the process of internationalization has itself become internationally collaborative” (Sutton et al., 2012, p. 149).

Sutton (2010) distinguishes between transactional partnerships and transformational partnerships. Transactional partnership involves exchanges of people, services, or resources, but the institutions remain largely unchanged. Transformational partnerships transform each institution through the generation of common goals, projects, and products. Transactional collaborations may be a good first step for global engagement, but long-term transformational partnerships have the potential to develop truly reciprocal relationships that promote access and equity and establish “negotiated space” around cultural differences (Hanada, 2021; Helms, 2015; Leng, 2013; Sperduti, 2019; Zuilkowski & Tsiga, 2021).

The creation of global higher education partnerships requires a considerable investment of time and resources and issues may arise that frequently hinder progress in various stages of the organizational change process (Altbach, 2010; Chan, 2021; Garrett et al., 2017; Helms, 2015; Lanford, 2020; Quinn, 2017). International partnerships are also subject to potentially unstable forces (de Wit & Altbach, 2021; Enkhtur et al., 2021; Otto, 2021), including ongoing geopolitical tensions, the rise of nationalism and populism, and restrictions on international mobility due to the COVID-19 pandemic. With these challenges, the stakes are high as U.S.-China higher education partnerships navigate difficult and ambiguous terrain.

PURPOSE STATEMENT AND RESEARCH QUESTION

The purpose of this paper is to explore the factors that contribute to the sustainability of U.S.-China higher education partnerships. By sustainable partnership, I mean substantial long-term collaborations between two higher education institutions (Garrett et al., 2017; Lanford, 2020). The following research question guides this paper: What practices have been effective in improving the prospects for long-term sustainability of these partnerships?

RESEARCH METHOD

This paper utilizes a qualitative single case study design to explore the factors contributing to the long-term sustainability of U.S.-China higher education partnerships. This single case study is exploratory in that the goal of the study is to develop the conceptual framework for future multiple case studies (Yin, 2018). The Chinese Ministry of Education (MoE) refers to international academic collaboration as Chinese-foreign cooperative education (State Council, 2003). Depending on the scope of the partnerships, these collaborations fall into three types: (a) university level, (b) institute level, and (c) program level. U.S.-China joint universities and institutes are a relatively recent phenomenon, most of them established since the early 2010's.

Purposeful sampling (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) is used to identify a single case of a U.S.-China joint institute that meets the following criteria: (1) is a joint institute between a U.S. institution and a Chinese institution, offering bachelor's degree and/or graduate education; (2) enrolled its first cohort of students no later than 2017; and (3) remains in operation at the time of the research.

The single case chosen is the GUFU-WMU Joint Institute, a partnership between Western Michigan University (WMU), a national research university

located in the Midwest, and Guizhou University of Finance and Economics (GUFU), a regional public university in Western China. Contact began in spring 2014, and the joint GUFU-WMU bachelor's program in Accountancy was approved by the MoE, with enrollment starting in 2015. In 2017, the MoE approved the GUFU-WMU Joint Institute and enrollment started in the same year. It would take almost three more years for WMU and GUFU to work out finer details of the Joint Institute. On March 12, 2020, the WMU Board of Trustees finalized and approved the GUFU-WMU 4+0 Agreement, which was just in time to add 585 students to WMU's overall enrollment as the institution braced itself for the impact of coronavirus.

Data was collected via direct observation and document analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Observation is sometimes employed by researchers in the course of qualitative case studies, but it remains an underutilized method of data collection in such studies (Bryman, 2011). In this study, operations of the GUFU-WMU Joint Institute were observed through WMU board meetings, where U.S. "sunshine laws" allow the public access to higher education information and meetings (McLendon & Hearn, 2004). This was supplemented by document research, which requires researchers to collect, collate and analyze empirical data to produce a theoretical account that either describes, interprets or explains what has occurred (Scott, 1990).

FINDINGS

To foster long-term and sustainable global partnerships, a set of essential enablers must be in place (Nolan & Hunter, 2012): Leadership, faculty and staff engagement, and policy support.

Leadership

The task of leadership is to create a collective vision and common values for global engagement by convincing the community of the need for change. Sustainable international partnerships call for a comprehensive approach to internationalization and expanded leadership (Hudzik & McCarthy, 2012). Leadership has to extend beyond the international office to include the board of trustees, the president, the chief academic officer, and academic deans.

On June 29, 2017, the WMU Board of Trustees approved the name change of the WMU-GUFU Joint Institute to Western Michigan Institute, GUFU. This was the last WMU board meeting that President John Dunn attended before his retirement. President Dunn elaborated on WMU's mature and new international

partnerships and shared facts and figures on the WMU-GUFE collaboration. He was going on his second trip to GUFE to attend the opening ceremony of the Western Michigan Institute.

Boards, in particular, play a key role in ensuring sustainable partnerships amidst turnover and change (Eckel & Kezar, 2016). Boards can support the appointment of internationally experienced and committed presidents and provosts (Hudzik & McCarthy, 2012). They can also facilitate the active recruitment and selection of deans and department chairs who are internationally experienced and have a demonstrated interest in global engagement. On September 20, 2017, for example, the WMU Board of Trustees appointed Paulo Zagalo-Melo, a Portuguese political scientist with a long track record in international education, to lead the Haenicke Institute for Global Education. Wolfgang Schlör, former Associate Provost for Global Education, had accepted a position at another institution earlier that year.

Faculty and Staff Engagement

Leaders need to invest time and energy to gain broad participation in and ownership of global engagement and identify key change agents with the necessary skills to drive the new vision forward. Participation has to extend beyond the international office to include faculty leaders and key institutional support units (Hudzik & McCarthy, 2012). Without the active engagement of faculty and staff, global partnerships would be impossible in any meaningful sense.

Just before the WMU Board of Trustees approved *Western Michigan University Strategic Plan: Gold Standard 2020* on March 23, 2016, Associate Provost Schlör and his team showcased to the board members WMU's global engagement. Joining Schlör were Professor Jim Butterfield, Chair of the International Education Council of the Faculty Senate, Hashim, a Fulbright student from Iran, and Naida, a U.S. student with study abroad experience. The team not only demonstrated WMU's achievements in student and faculty mobility, but also highlighted a vision toward a long-term, comprehensive approach, focusing on global learning for all.

Policy Support

Once the direction of global engagement has been established, a set of mechanisms are needed to sustain the process and realize the goals (Adams & Lanford, 2021; Hudzik & McCarthy, 2012). The shared vision must be supported by a clearly articulated strategy that sets out key objectives, supporting structures,

and timelines. The WMU Board of Trustees approved WMU's *Strategic Plan 2020* on March 23, 2016. Global engagement is one of the three pillars of the *Strategic Plan*.

The motion to establish the GUFU-WMU Joint Institute was passed by the WMU board on December 13, 2016. Associate Provost Schlör spoke for less than two minutes concerning the GUFU-WMU agreement, and the trustees passed the motion swiftly. McLendon and Hearn (2004) argue that "sunshine laws", designed to allow the public broad access to higher education information and meetings, may have potential negative impacts onboard communication and deliberation.

However, it is noteworthy that Schlör had prepared for the WMU Board of Trustees a document package as an open record. This 58-page package, documenting the GUFU-WMU collaboration from 2014 to 2016, included the following items: (a) the first Memorandum of Understanding; (b) three agreements on joint programs, (c) an application form for the GUFU-WMU Joint Institute, and (d) a proposal to establish the GUFU-WMU Joint Institute.

CONCLUSION

This study brings more awareness of the challenges and opportunities associated with partnerships by exploring conditions that can improve the prospects of long-term sustainability for colleges and universities interested in stable, mutually beneficial collaborations. The findings of this study confirm that a set of essential enablers must be in place in order to foster long-term and sustainable global partnerships. International partnerships must be responsive to the changing needs of the students, faculty, and administrators and to external political, economic, and ideological factors. Critical to the sustainability of any long-term partnership is a shared commitment by both institutions. Future multiple case studies are needed to describe, document, and interpret the critical factors that contribute to the sustainability of U.S.-China higher education partnerships.

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YUQIAN “YVONNE” ZHANG, M.S., is a doctoral student in the Educational Leadership program at Western Michigan University. Her research interests include the internationalization of higher education and global leadership. Email: yuqian.zhang@wmich.edu

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