Reflections on the University of Cincinnati and Salahaddin University Linkage Work

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Abstract
This session shares experience of obtaining and implementing a highly successful University Linkages Program between the University of Cincinnati, USA and Salahaddin University, Kurdistan, Iraq. The authors will reflect on practices and make recommendations for setting and implementing achievable goals; negotiating and maintaining personal and institutional relationships; and strategies for addressing potential challenges during and beyond the linkage. This session should be of interest to administrators, faculty, and staff who are currently involved in and/or planning on working with international partners.

Keywords: linkages program; Kurdistan, Iraq; international partnership

1. Introduction
The University of Cincinnati (UC) and Salahaddin University, Hawler (SUH) Linkage partnership is a part of the US-Iraq Linkages Project sponsored by the Academy of Educational Development (AED, currently FHI 360) and the American Embassy in Baghdad/US State Department. AED’s objectives for the project were to: 1) Update curriculum; 2) Create distance learning opportunities; 3) Update teaching methods; 4) have selective exchanges for faculty and students; and 5) Development of career centers. The Partnership goals were to: 1) Increase English language proficiency; 2) Acquire current knowledge in selected fields; 3) Increase knowledge of current pedagogical practices; 4) Increase faculty research ability; 5) Utilize e-learning/online delivery methods; 6) Advance exchange opportunities between Salahaddin University, Hawler (SUH)/UC; and 7) Establish positive relationships between SUH and the Hawler community to create a career center.

2. Accomplishments

Working towards the project goals and objectives, we have had nine (9) site visits (7 visits by 17 UC personnel and 2 visits by 23 SUH personnel); Had two-and-half years of professional development work through Blackboard, DVC meetings, email, Skype discussions of research, theory, pedagogy, and technology. Together, we redesigned and developed 24 courses (16 Language & Literature Pedagogies, 8 Economics and Finance courses) and conducted a two-week on-site workshop on student-centered pedagogy, technology, and some English language training in

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Cincinnati, USA. UC faculty demonstrated research and pedagogical methods in Erbil, taught and co-taught courses and provided feedback on SUH faculty teaching. We arranged access for over 30 SUH faculty to UC libraries and purchased hundreds of books, Kindles, video cameras, and journal subscriptions for SUH. UC-SUH faculty attended Career Center development workshop in Malaysia and engaged in co-authored research that have been presented at international conferences (e.g., Beckett, Muhammad, & Omer, 2012; Dell & Hakeem; 2012; Galali & Beckett, 2012; Kendall-Theado, Omer, & Highley, 2012); and established great personal connections and working relationships with SUH colleagues and administration. Currently, we are working on setting-up a career center, organizing a conference, and publication of some of collaborative work.

3. Reflections

Our work together has already proved to be informative and very useful social and academic cultural exchange and learning opportunities. The UC project leaders and faculty involved in the grant project learned that collaboration work like this requires tremendous patience and flexibility (e.g., plans needed to be altered several times due to change of focus schedules). They learned that having committed and responsible personnel in place both in the US and in Iraq as well as persistence are crucial ingredients for grant implementation. They also learned that onsite work (both in Iraq and in the US) is the most efficient and effective mode of communication and work; DVC meetings are second most effective and efficient. There is strong desire among SUH faculty to be in US to experience American culture in person.

SUH faculty participated in the grant project found the pedagogical strategies they learned from their UC colleagues and implanting them in their own classes very useful and important for faculty development as they thought the grant project provided great opportunities to gain new content and pedagogical knowledge. They agreed that systematic follow-up as well as moral and technical support from their administration are even more important as they felt such efforts are crucial for making programs like this even bigger success. Furthermore, SUH faculty found the required reading, writing, and discussion assignments on the Blackboard Learning Community very useful because they gained new it provided opportunities to read thoughtfully and engage scholarly and professional discussions with their UC as well as SUH colleagues. SUH faculty found research collaboration with UC colleagues enriching scholarly, culturally, administratively, and scientifically.

4. Challenges

Challenges for UC faculty included a sense of resistance from some SUH personnel on various aspect of the project (also see Beckett, Muhammad, & Omer, 2012; Galali & Beckett, 2012; Kendall-Theado, Omer, & Highley, 2012). For example, it was frustrating and discouraging that not everyone was eagerly and thoroughly evolved in the curriculum revision and development work; that female faculty involvement in the grant program has been less than ideal; and that career center work had a later start due to bureaucracy at multiple levels.

Challenges for SUH project leaders included getting their junior colleagues more actively involved in the grant project work as their colleagues felt the work required by the Linkages Program initiative became an added burden to their already overloaded teaching and administrative work. Some of their colleagues lacked the technology literacy necessary for the work.

SUH project leaders too experienced problematic bureaucracy and inflexibility. They detected mismatch between new pedagogical approaches and various assessments approaches in Kurdistan. Other challenges for SUH project leaders included resistance to change at different levels particularly from some senior faculty whose background is deeply rooted in traditional pedagogies. They also encountered resistance from their students who are also more
familiar with the traditional methods of learning. For example, content-based and student-centered language learning approach is foreign to them and therefore they find it difficult to switch from form-based teacher-centered language learning. Additional challenges included lack of internet access in their classrooms and small physical size of their classrooms that is not conducive for implementing new approaches they learned from their UC colleagues.

5. Conclusion and Suggestions

In conclusion, the UC-SUH Linkages Program during the past two-and-half years has been a great success and tremendous learning experience for the US and Iraqi faculty and administrators despite some frustrations and challenges. We hope others who maybe embarking on similar mission find this brief sharing of our experience insightful make their planning implementing implementation work a bit easier. However brief it is, this article also contributes to the very scarce publications on US educational initiatives in Iraq and USA-Iraq faculty collaboration. A more substantial discussion of our work with a discussion of its relevance to global neoliberal development literature is in progress and will be shared soon.

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References


