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Partnerships Fuel Internationalization

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The great Alabamian Helen Keller once said, “Alone I can do so little, together we can do so much.” Alabama-based Troy University drew upon Miss Keller’s philosophy of community spirit and shared mission when we embarked on our voyage of intentional internationalization 20 years ago.

It was evident that teamwork—on many levels— was needed to change the culture at TROY to one that would embrace full internationalization. Moreover, we realized we would need a network of strong international partners to transform TROY from a regional university to a global one. Indeed, we shaped partnerships with many international universities—and then those partnerships shaped us!

Our job was made somewhat easier through our experience in distance education and teaching overseas through contracts with the Department of Defense. We began offering degree programs to service personnel on U.S. military bases abroad in the 1970s, but teaching overseas is only a step toward globalization. Complete, effective internationalization of Troy University had to begin at home. We rewrote our mission statement to reflect this reality, but more importantly, we embraced the mission.

At Troy University, we opted for a “three-legged stool” approach of (a.) recruiting international students, (b.) encouraging faculty development and (c.) creating study-abroad programs. Each “leg” required linkages and partnerships to succeed.

When I grew up many years ago in Alabama, it was often we would compare ourselves with neighboring states. Today we compare ourselves with countries around the world, and we owe it to our students to prepare them to be globally competitive. Our students must learn to live with people from other lands. We’re in a world of multiculturalism the likes of which we’ve never seen in the history of mankind. It’s important to understand others because appreciation will follow understanding.

The results? In 1990 we enrolled 40 students from 13 nations on our Troy Campus. Today, 850 students from 60 nations study with Troy University in the USA.

Growth was achieved through the usual means of aggressive recruiting overseas, the importance of which cannot be discounted. Our international recruiting efforts began to catch fire, however, when we became the first U.S. university to participate in what is now known as the Sino-American 1-2-1 Dual Degree Program.

The 1-2-1 programs enables Chinese students at partner institutions to start their degree programs, transfer to TROY for two years and then return to their home universities to complete their degree requirements. The first class of 40 students in the 1-2-1 program arrived in fall 2001. A total of 363 students have participated to date. The program “primed the pump” for internationalization at TROY by giving us a source of academically qualified international students eager for a U.S. degree.

Indeed, our international students have become a recognizable thread of the fabric at Troy University. I can’t imagine a parade down University Avenue without Chinese students doing a Dragon Dance against the backdrop of the old oaks and classic buildings that compose our campus in Troy. And the annual International Students Cultural Organization (ISCO) festival is one of the most popular events on campus.

The success of our international programs—including the 1-2-1 program—can be attributed to the relationships we have built and maintained with approximately 150 partner universities. This entails regular visits abroad, hosting faculty members on our campus and, not in the least, taking care of their students once they arrive in Troy.

The partnerships we established through 1-2-1 led us to the Office of the Chinese Language Council International in Beijing and ultimately to the development of a Confucius Institute at Troy University in 2007. TROY’s Confucius Institute is part of a global network dedicated to the promotion and development of Chinese language education, and cultural and business exchange with the People’s Republic of China.

Strong linkages with other institutions are equally vital when we establish Troy University locations in other nations, as we have done in 11 countries outside the United States. When we decided to expand to Vietnam in 2004, we sought cooperation of key university partners: Hanoi University of Science and Technology and University of Economics and Business and Saigon Technology University. As a result, in 2008 Troy University became the first U.S. university to award the baccalaureate degree in a nation we once viewed as an adversary. Today, our enrollment in Vietnam exceeds 1,000 students and many have matriculated from our campuses in Hanoi and Saigon to complete their studies in Troy.

Whether forming partnerships for study abroad, faculty exchanges, or dual-degree programs, rule one is this: Don’t view the world’s peoples with a parochial attitude. Appreciate the fact that universities overseas have as much to bring to the table as U.S. universities.

Rule two is don’t ignore internal linkages, especially faculty. To foster internationalization we invested in a special fund to encourage faculty to study, work and travel abroad. How can we expect faculty to embrace internationalization if they have never traveled abroad themselves? Until the faculty commits to the

concept of university globalization it will not occur. The commitment cannot be limited to the office of the president or chancellor. The CEO must be a strong advocate, but he or she cannot be the sole champion.

Because of the dedication of our faculty and staff, intentional internationalization at Troy University has taken on a synergy of its own. When interviewing prospective faculty members I am gratified to hear how many of them are familiar with our international orientation and want to be part of a university that sees itself in a global manner.

Faculty commitment is essential when building study-abroad programs, another key piece of the international mosaic at TROY. A decade ago, our study-abroad offerings were negligible. Today, our students travel abroad to nations such as England, Sweden, Belgium, China, Costa Rica, France, Germany, Kenya, Mexico and Ecuador, among others. Partner universities in many of these nations aid our efforts to send TROY students overseas. At the recommendation of deans and faculty we are developing academic programs, for example one in international economic development, which will require students to study abroad.

In 2004, while attending our first 1-2-1 commencement in China I met the father of one of our graduates named Yu Chunlan . Mr. Yu said he was the number-three importer of designer neckties into the United States. Curiosity compelled me to examine the label of the necktie I was wearing, one I had bought in Montgomery.

“That’s one of my neckties,” Mr. Yu said.

I asked why a man of obvious means sent his daughter across 13 time zones to attend college in Alabama. He said: “I want her to understand the free-market system and be fluent in English—it will help Chunlan and she will help my business!” The Yu family, like so many from nations outside the USA, places a high value on a degree from an American university.

Three years later, I received a letter from one of our students from rural Alabama. She majored in Risk Management and Insurance. Today she is a rising executive in the insurance business. Her letter praised her internship at Lloyd’s of London. She wrote:

“London is on the opposite side of the earth, but for a young woman from Jack, Alabama, it might as well have been three planets away. The things that I learned from this adventure could never be taught from a textbook. I am truly lucky to have gotten to experience this first hand.”

As the above anecdotes illustrate, international partnerships change more than a university’s culture; they also change students’ lives. And isn’t changing lives what great universities aspire to do?