

International Partnerships from a U.S. Perspective

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Abstract: *The number of collaborations between U.S. and international theological institutions may double in the next few years. Two Association of Theological Schools peer groups have recently completed a dialogue concerning global partnership practices. Their suggestions to the Association highlighted the practicalities of reciprocity and the value of attention to formation while imagining an international organization to facilitate accreditation and other academic logistics. As the number of majority world Ph.D. programs also increases, the arrangements between institutions will take on a more robust peer-to-peer quality.*

Introduction

A recent report from Michigan State University’s Alliance for African Partnership observes that 1.8 billion of the world’s population are between the ages of ten and twenty-four, with 87% living in less-developed countries (Effiong 2017, 40). For those of us interested in graduate and post-graduate education, the U.S. Census Bureau reports there are 2.25 billion people in the world between the ages of twenty-five and forty-five (U.S. Census Bureau 2017). If the same 87% ratio were to apply, then almost 1.9 billion people in this age group live in developing countries. Given the present realities of Christian faith saturation in these regions, the market for theological education in developing countries far outstrips current institutional capacity.

The first main finding from the World Council of Churches’ Global Survey on Theological Education 2011-2013 confirms the trend: “There are not enough theological schools in the regions of the world where Christianity is growing rapidly (Africa, Latin America, and parts of Asia). In Europe and North America there is a much better match between the need for theological education and the number of institutions and programs” (Esterline 2013, 2). Formal theological education is not keeping pace in many of the regions where Christianity is growing

the fastest. Additionally, depending on one’s definition of “developing,” many of the countries gaining the most attention from U.S. higher education partners (all types, not just theological education institutions) are not those identified in the Michigan State University report.

Top countries for international partnerships (2016)

Existing Activity	Targeted for Expanded Activity
China	China
Japan	India
United Kingdom	Brazil
Germany	Mexico
France	Vietnam
South Korea	South Korea

(Helms et al. 2017, 34)

Organizations like Langham Partners, Overseas Council, Inc., and ScholarLeaders are at the forefront of preparing theological faculty to meet the need. At the same time, a significant number of U.S. seminaries and divinity schools are collaborating with international schools. Over a quarter of U.S. member institutions currently have international partners, and another 20 percent are earnestly considering alliances. “If the explorations are fruitful, half of ATS [Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada] member schools soon could have international partnerships” (Graham 2017, 1). International partnerships and raising up indigenous scholars will provide the major portion of the need for theological educators. Open source initiatives like biblicaltraining.org will be key contributors as well.

Serving the Church Universal

The nature of theological education in regions of emerging Christianity differs from Western models. Partnerships must represent the cultures they serve. Dr. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, Professor of Contemporary African Christianity and Pentecostal/Charismatic Theology at Trinity Theological Seminary, Accra, Ghana, points to the preternatural contexts and how one must frame partnerships to match.

First is the partnership with God in Christ through the Holy Spirit because, as the Spirit of Truth, He is our Advocate and Teacher. Second is the recognition of the shift in Christian presence from the paradigmatic centers of theological education to new centers, or new heartlands, in the South and partnering with

those people among whom the Spirit is at work. It does not mean that the Christianity of the Global North ceases to matter but that in the South the faith exuberantly engages with new religious worldviews sensitive to supernatural realities (Asamoah-Gyadu 2014).

Collaborations with majority world institutions seek to honor the unique qualities of each setting. A U.S. school possibly less likely to experience signs and wonders enters into the world of an international school where miracles are “normal.” The former may offer new courses or degrees while the latter invites the partner into the power and mystery of the Spirit at work in their midst. Scholars from both regions bring their academic expertise and worldviews. Two geographical expressions of the Church universal come together in mission.

The International Council for Evangelical Theological Education, in its 2010 Doctoral Consultation, echoes these values in the “Beirut Benchmarks.” “Doctoral study, therefore, pursued on such a foundation, will be confessional, rational and missional. For a Christian, doctoral study is one dimension of what it means to ‘love the LORD your God with all your heart and mind and soul and strength’” (ICETE 2010, 1). Doctoral students will be nurtured in biblical and confessional faith, trained in the best of the academic disciplines, and sent for missional purposes. They are expected to “promote the kingdom of God and advance the mission of the church (both local and global), through Christ-like and transformational service, to the glory of God” (ibid).

A Broad Theological Enterprise

Any relationship between a U.S. institution and another school, whether domestic or international, attends to the theological, cultural, and political differences of the exchange. Many international partnerships are between schools from the evangelical stream of the Church universal. At the same time, other streams of the church provide theological education for their leaders around the world. The Association of Theological Schools, as a mediator between multiple traditions, proposes it “would continue cultivating relationships with partners that reflect the ecclesial families of ATS member schools. These include the World Council of Churches program in Ecumenical Theological Education (WCC/ETE), organizations like the World Evangelical Association and its connection with the International Council for Evangelical Theological Education (ICETE), the Lausanne Network, and accreditation agencies and associations outside North America (e.g., The Association for Theological Education in South East Asia [ATESEA], Asia Theological Association [ATA])” (Ruiz 2014). International accredited theological education will reflect the breadth of the church as well.

As part of ATS’s efforts to raise global awareness and engagement in its member

schools, its accrediting standards speak of seeking interconnectedness and interdependence with international partners. Among other goals, member institutions should ensure that their instructional methods are attentive to cultural assumptions and that course design addresses global complexity. They should advance their institutional culture toward a globalized learning environment and encourage teaching, learning, and research that result in global awareness and responsiveness (ATS Self-Study Handbook).

Current Practices

In a survey of a subset of its membership, the ATS Director of Research and Faculty Development, Deborah H. C. Gin, learned that more than half of the responding schools offer courses and programs in international contexts. Eighty-two percent of responding schools collaborate with international institutions in international contexts. About 90 percent have faculty teaching in international settings. All of them have faculty with prior experiences overseas. Nearly all have international students at their schools. About three-fourths have students studying abroad. Over a third offer courses in North America in languages other than English. About one-fifth offer courses internationally in languages other than English (Gin 2017, 1).

This research was conducted for one of the Global Partnerships Peer Groups convened by ATS for its Educational Models and Practice in Theological Education initiative. The various groups serving the initiative, two of which addressed global partnerships, met during 2016–17. As noted above, not all of the ATS institutions are engaged in global collaborations. The ratio of those who do may approach 50 percent in the next few years.

Critical Issues

The Global Partnership Peer Group I was privileged to join represented five schools active in international collaborations. As the group dialogued over the months, three critical issues persisted. The first centered on the theological value of reciprocity. Using a Trinitarian framework, partnership embodies a bi-directional relationship, a type of “Spirited dance” calling participants to mutuality and trust. Differences become gift, and the good of the other takes priority. The relationship becomes increasingly missional. To the extent that each party senses the partnership to be aligned with God’s purposes, the collaboration moves forward.

Living out that theological value challenges systems, particularly in implementation. How do partners honor differing learning styles and approaches to education? How do stakeholders account for power and privilege dynamics? Which ethical standards prevail, for example, around the definition of plagiarism? How do the relationships leaven each institution (Bullock 2017, 3)?

A second area examined formational aspects of the collaboration.

Pedagogically, the perennial issues involve how best to create experiences, even though short-term, in which students will undergo the formative experiences, especially intercultural competency, self-knowledge, spiritual formation, and increased sensitivity to the *Missio Dei*, for which the programs are designed (ibid).

Key questions in this area include: How will each partner’s students be transformed by the collaboration? What educational benefits will the partnership offer that would not be available without it?

The final critical issue has been alluded to earlier in this article. Most institutions across the world value accreditation. Yet, collaboration among accrediting agencies can be spotty at best. How might course credits be transferred between partners? How is residency defined? What competencies aggregate to validate a theological degree? How will outcomes be assessed? In what languages will the courses be taught? How will resources “such as libraries, faculties, finances, administrative processes, personnel, information technology, and other resources” be shared by the partners, especially when there may be financial disparities between them (ibid)?

Might there emerge an international agency or guild that can help members collaborate? If so, it would need to:

recognize, foster, and hold in common best practices (assessment rubrics, credit hours, degree compositions, teaching, curriculum, learning, and research models appropriate to each region, culture, and people group). This body would, by necessity, need to be collegial, dialogical, reciprocal, and model cultural diversity and contextualization within its own constituency (Bullock 2017, 3-4).

Eschatological Unity

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