Four points to consider for international partnerships

By Deborah H. C. Gin

International partnership is a growing edge for ATS schools, but is it the right innovation for your school? Findings from a recent survey of schools[1] engaged globally provide guidance if you are considering moving in this direction.

Twenty-seven percent of ATS schools that participated in the Educational Models survey to deans indicated they are currently engaged with an international partnership. These partnerships have been particularly pursued by the largest ATS schools, by denominationally affiliated schools, and by mainline Protestant schools.[2] Many others indicated they were "seriously considering" or "about to implement" them. (See *Colloquy* for additional findings.) In addition, schools in the group are among the busiest, with 55% of the schools reporting 15 or more "programs" in addition to their degree offerings. But all member schools might learn from the successes and missteps of schools who have already paved the way.

4 POINTS TO KEEP IN MIND

To be sure, international partnerships come with key benefits. In the Educational Models survey to program directors, for example, respondents on average named this kind of program as one of the highest for strengthening the school's reputation. The same goes for increasing student learning.

> ***It is important to note that "global engagement" is a broader concept than "international partnerships" and includes a variety of forms (e.g., offering courses in international contexts, having faculty who teach in international contexts, having international students in your North American school context, having students who study in international contexts). Schools often look past these typically less-expensive forms, not realizing that organizations can engage in critical global learning, even without the extensive international degree-program exchange of a formal partnership. You must be intentional, however, and find ways to share the learning of a few across the whole school community.***

1 All 61 schools who had indicated in the Ed Models-Deans survey that they were "currently doing" partnerships with international partners were invited to participate in this second survey. Of these, 33 responded, 27 of which "collaborate with an international institution."

2 This group is over-represented by the following institutional characteristics (as compared to the ATS database):
- Mainline Protestant (40%, versus 34%)
- Denominationally affiliated (74%, versus 55%)
- Largest (35%, versus 23%)—fairly well-represented by small (HC 1-75) and large (HC 151-300) and under-represented by mid-sized (HC 76-150) schools).

For schools whose mission and/or supporting communities compel formal collaborations with international partners, there are several things to consider.

1 Memorandum of understanding

Should you craft some sort of agreement or contract? Consider what having one does and communicates, as well as what not having one means. An overwhelming majority (74%) of schools who reported collaborating with an international institution indicated they have a memorandum of understanding (MOU). For some, this MOU is brief; for others, it outlines details of the partnership. (See list of schools with MOUs at the end of this article.)

2 Transfer or sharing of credit

Formal arrangements typically include course credit. Figuring out in advance how credit will transfer, into current programs as well as for future situations, is a key consideration. Almost 60% of schools that collaborate with an international partner accept the transfer or sharing of credit with the partner. Evaluation processes that were reported for transfer of credit range from the use of external agencies (e.g., ATS, a "credential evaluation center," or the respective country's department of education) to internal mechanisms (e.g., case by case, registrar's office, or in conjunction with a director of international programs). Some schools set up transfer-credit arrangements in advance with specific schools to ensure compatibility with the North American institution, while for others such arrangements are not necessary because transfer policies mirror those of domestic-credit transfer.

Two other considerations for credit transfer are the criteria for, and limits to, transferring credit. Criteria for whether credits could be transferred include categories such as, among others, participation in a pre-established program (e.g., three-week intensive), minimum grade received, whether the course was taught by the North American school's faculty, or whether an equivalent course exists in the specific degree program at the North American school. Limits to the number of courses that could be transferred range from two courses to 50% of total course requirements. Another aspect to consider is whether the transfer is 1-to-1 or many-to-1 (i.e., international credit-to-North American credit).

3 Sharing of resources

Among the most frequently named elements of collaboration is the sharing of resources with the international partner institution. Nearly 75% of the schools with a formal collaboration said they share resources with their partner schools. The array of resources include human resources (i.e., administrative personnel and faculty, including adjunct faculty as dissertation advisors), infrastructure or processes (e.g., library or facilities such as classroom or housing), finances (e.g., transportation, travel, scholarships), student materials (e.g., textbook and course-lecture translation, computers, or e-textbooks), and curriculum.

The global partnerships peer groups of the Educational Models project consistently highlighted mutuality as a necessary core value in this work. This applies both to what is gained in the partnership (e.g., student learning or institutional learning) and what is shared (e.g., "open source mutuality" of one school's shared curriculum with its partner). That said, schools would be remiss not to recognize ways that partnerships between North American schools and schools outside of North America accentuate power asymmetries in terms of resources, decision-making, reputation, deference, and many others.

In addition, if your school is considering a formal international partnership, keep in mind the possibility of regulatory changes. Such shifts can show up in any of the resource categories mentioned above, but it would be wise to consider *a priori* the implications of changes in federal travel, visa and immigration, and library policies, in particular. How nimble would your school be to address the changes? If your school is in an embedded setting, would the larger university or church impose strategies to minimize risk in ways that would affect your partnership? One school, for example, described how challenging it was to the program when tighter university regulations made access to electronic resources difficult.

4 Residency and other accrediting standards

Making sure residency requirements have been met can sometimes become too high of a hurdle when you want to innovate, particularly when it involves multiple paradigms of providing education. Schools that participated in this survey named a wide range of definitions for residency. Some reported residency in terms of duration or minimum length of engagement. Others framed residency by mode of delivery, naming online delivery as a potential way of meeting residency requirements.

Still others explained residency by whether physical presence was at the host school or the partner institution; in one case, students studying in the context of the partner institution are "not treated as if they are in residence but are entered as full-time, zero-credit exchange study."

The current ATS standards on residency specify "in-person interaction of students with instructors or other educators . . . in locations approved for the offering of a full degree" (ES.2.1.1). By "location," the standards refer to a school's main campus or extension site approved to offer the complete degree because residency is defined specific to each degree program. In the case of hybrid courses, credits "will count toward residency for those degrees that require residential instruction only if the majority of instructor-directed learning occurs . . . in person on the school's main campus or at an extension . . . " (ES.4.2.19). There are additional nuances, per degree program, but they basically boil down to the following minimum residency requirements: one-third of the MDiv, professional MA, DMin, and specialized doctoral degrees; two-thirds of MA in music degrees; and virtually all course work for the ThM and PhD/ThD degrees. These requirements make no distinction between North American and international contexts.[3]

Residency requirements, however, can be met by seeking approval for exception. Almost one fifth (48) of ATS schools have petitioned for one or more exceptions to residency involving 130 different degree programs. Exceptions to residency comprise the overwhelming majority (130 out of 142) of those granted since the last revision of the standards in 2012—an indication that this standard is not working well for schools. Petitioning for exception to residency, then, may be part of your future picture.

Finally, unlike sharing of resources, sharing of assessment standards was not reported as frequently. Only 30% of schools who reported a formal collaboration with an international partner said they share assessment standards between the institutions. In their descriptions of the process, four of these eight schools referenced some form of North American standard (i.e., ATS or regional accreditor), and another three schools reported engaging in a process of determining standards that align with both global partners (i.e., North American and international).

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While this is a growing edge of ATS innovation, a number of schools reported discontinuing international partnerships. Of the schools who listed at least one program as "formerly, not now" in the Ed Models-Deans survey, 15% indicated the discontinuation of a partnership with an international partner. As compared to the sample of schools who discontinued any program, these schools were overrepresented by embedded schools, Canadian schools, mainline Protestant schools, and independent (versus denominationally affiliated) schools.

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3 Thanks go to ATS accrediting staff for this synopsis.

Resources for Schools Considering International Partnerships

There are a number of reasons a school would consider entering into a partnership with an international partner. It may be a way to embody the school's mission; denominational entities may be encouraging it; or global learning and engagement may be the way for the school to move beyond increasing provincialism. There are many other possible reasons. If this is your school, here are four helpful resources:

1. Guidelines on Global Awareness and Engagement from ATS Board of Directors—*ATS has been involved in this work since the 1980s, with a major project on globalization; this set of guidelines was adopted by the ATS Board in 2013.*
2. Guidelines for Petitioning for International Theological Education—*a document adopted by the Board of Commissioners, outlining issues, assumptions, and procedures for engaging internationally.*
3. *Your accrediting liaison—the surveys referenced in this article highlight a number of ideas for international partnerships; your ATS accrediting liaison is best able to walk you through what makes most sense for your particular context.*
4. *Below is a list of schools and contacts who are willing to share their MOUs and is a great place to start.*

Memorandum of Understanding—Contact Information

School	Contact Name	Email
Abilene Christian University	Melinda Thompson	mlt11a@acu.edu
Assemblies of God Theological Seminary	Randy C. Walls	rwalls@agts.edu
B. H. Carroll Theological Institute	Stan Moore	smoore@bhcarroll.edu
Candler School of Theology of Emory University	Jonathan Strom	jstrom@emory.edu
Claremont School of Theology	Sheryl Kujawa-Holbrook	skujawa-holbrook@cst.edu
International Theological Seminary	James Lee	James.lee@itsla.edu
Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia	Jayakiran Sebastian	jsebastian@ltsp.edu
Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary	Mark Leeds	mleeds@swbts.edu
Union Theological Seminary	Andrea White	awhite@uts.columbia.edu