



A NEW CONTEXT FOR SUSTAINABLE AND INTENTIONAL

# **GLOBAL PARTNERSHIPS IN HIGHER EDUCATION**



TERRADOTTA



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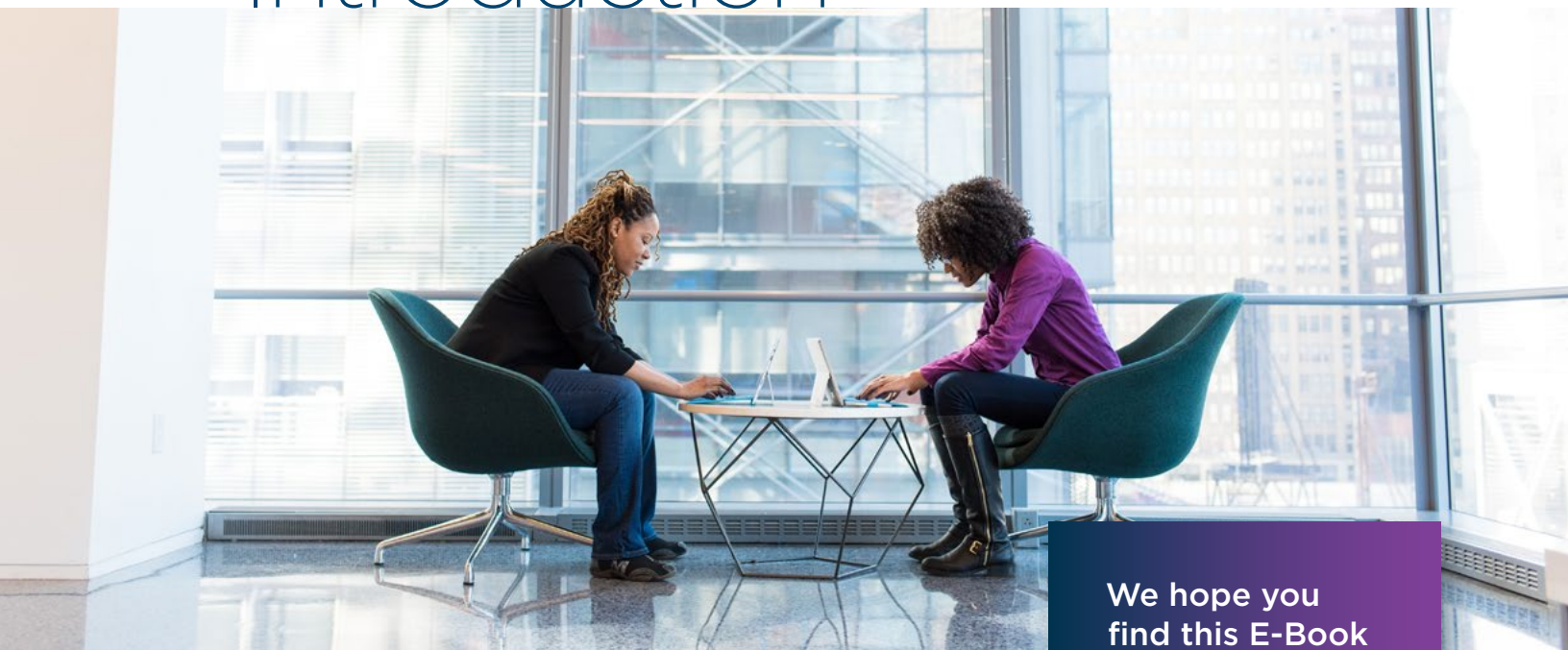
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# Introduction



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**E**MERGING FROM the Covid-19 pandemic, a time when many international higher education **partnership activities languished** or ended altogether, there is a renewed effort by global offices to build collaborations that are resilient, reciprocal, and advance each partner institution's mission and strategic goals. The disruptions of the pandemic have highlighted the need to refocus partnership strategies and to develop a strategy if none existed previously.

Within this context, institutions have sought engagement that is truly transformational for the **partnering institutions**, and which includes a broad range of stakeholders within each institution, combines resources, and develops common goals. Such linkages have been referred to as **strategic partnerships**. Much has changed recently though, due to the pandemic and concurrent world events. There is a **new level of awareness regarding social justice, climate change, political divisiveness, and war**.

For senior international officers and other international education leaders, this new context is leading to a refocusing of **strategic partnerships** to support higher education in **addressing global challenges**.



# DEVELOPING **PARTNERSHIPS** IN A POST-PANDEMIC CONTEXT

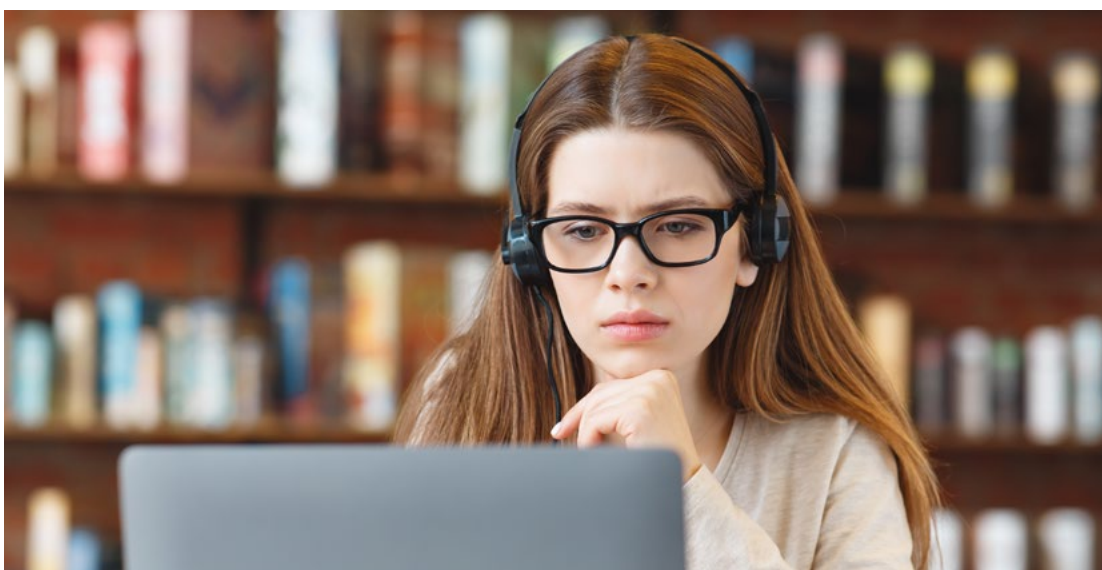


**DEVELOPING STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS** has always been challenging despite good intentions, numerous stakeholders ready to engage, and stewardship by a global office to develop multidisciplinary and multilayered collaborations.

Recently, the pandemic has been the most significant disrupter of collaborations by suspending and interrupting international travel. Resources are more limited as faculty and staff time is diverted to other pressing issues and funding for projects may have ended. Like much of higher education, many global offices have experienced significant financial constraints causing a reduction of staff and insufficient capability to support partnerships.

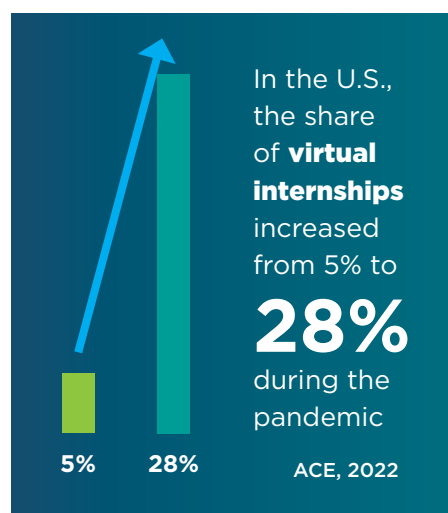
On the other hand, the pandemic has offered new opportunities. John Barnhart, Director and Senior Consultant at EAB, notes that partnerships are surviving due to, “extremely resilient, innovative and talented research individuals at universities across the globe who have [not just weathered the pandemic, but have found a silver lining.](https://www.timeshighereducation.com/hub/eab/p/reimagining-international-partnerships-post-covid-world)”<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/hub/eab/p/reimagining-international-partnerships-post-covid-world>



One of the benefits has been an increased use of technology to enhance virtual connections. NC State, for example, recently reported a [growth in collaborative international online learning \(COIL\) projects such as with their Japanese partners.](#)<sup>2</sup> Likewise, the University of Denver has placed an emphasis on COIL, offering [pedagogical and technical support for faculty and students.](#)<sup>3</sup>

At the same time, according to the American Council on Education's (ACE) 2022 [Mapping Internationalization on U.S. Campuses](#), the share of virtual internships increased in the U.S. from 5 to 28% during the pandemic, allowing domestic students to work with companies overseas and international students to intern with U.S. firms.<sup>4</sup> Doing so has helped expand global learning to students who might not otherwise have participated, thus furthering diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts.



The increased use and adoption of virtual meetings has assisted in the continuation of some collaborative activities and, at the very least, facilitated ongoing discussions among key individuals engaged in partnerships. Additionally, institutions like Elon University have [witnessed a sudden uptick in study abroad](#),<sup>5</sup> along with increased opportunities for global engagement now that pandemic-related restrictions are easing.

<sup>2</sup> <https://japan.ncsu.edu/june-8th-2021-interview-with-ambassador-tomita>

<sup>3</sup> <https://internationalization.du.edu/global-learning-internationalization-initiatives/international-partnerships>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.acenet.edu/Documents/Mapping-Internationalization-2022.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.elon.edu/u/news/2022/01/20/inside-higher-ed-highlights-elons-study-abroad-programs>

Institutions like Penn State have worked with Terra Dotta to use their breadth of tools for office operations, reducing staff time spent on administrative processes and improving services for students and faculty.



The pandemic has likewise expanded the types of partnerships in which institutions are engaging, moving beyond university-to-university relationships. For example, institutions are increasingly partnering with education technology companies, such as Terra Dotta, to use their breadth of tools for office operations, reducing staff time spent on administrative processes and improving services for students and faculty. Other companies offer virtual internships, global courses taught online, project management software, and other digital services.

Institutional partnerships with non-profit organizations likewise have grown, allowing for a greater focus on community-based learning and research. In addressing the UN's Sustainable Development Goals, a [recent report by the British Council](https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/role_of_international_higher_education_partnerships_in_contributing_to_the_sustainable_development_goals.pdf) notes that higher education institutions can coordinate with a broader set of partners, including public sector organizations, NGOs, and private companies.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup>[https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/role\\_of\\_international\\_higher\\_education\\_partnerships\\_in\\_contributing\\_to\\_the\\_sustainable\\_development\\_goals.pdf](https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/role_of_international_higher_education_partnerships_in_contributing_to_the_sustainable_development_goals.pdf)



# REASSESSING CORE VALUES



**IN THIS NEW ERA**, there has been a need for higher education institutions to strive for a broader vision for partnerships—both as key catalysts for advancing an institution’s global connections and aspirations, as well as in addressing critical needs related to solving global challenges.

Penn State, for example, has placed a greater focus on partnerships in non-Western locations, including Latin America and Sub-Saharan Africa. As part of this vision, started prior to the pandemic, the University established a multidisciplinary [Water-Energy-Food Nexus](https://sites.psu.edu/wefnexus)<sup>7</sup> to address the impacts of climate change.

Other universities and colleges similarly report a **rearticulation of core values** including: a focus on **expanding access to global opportunities for all students**; a **commitment to social justice, diversity, equity, and inclusion**; and the development of partnerships that are reciprocal and focused on shared goals.

<sup>7</sup> <https://sites.psu.edu/wefnexus>

# BUILDING WITH INTENTIONALITY



**IN THE PAST,** strategic partnership development was not as intentional, with opportunities growing organically from individual faculty and staff connections. More recently, stewardship by global offices, faculty travel grants, seed grant competitions and the development of common goals have incentivized multidisciplinary research and education collaborations.

At the same time, few US institutions have defined their goals for partnership development. [The ACE](#) finds that only 18% of institutions in the U.S. reported having an international partnership strategy.<sup>8</sup> This illustrates the need for a renewed effort to align partnership development with specific goals and impacts to be achieved and building a plan of action.

Rather than striving for a long list of partners, an increasing number of institutions are focusing on **developing a limited number of strategic linkages** as part of the overall partnership portfolio. At the University of Utah, Sabine Klahr developed a strategy that prioritized multidisciplinary partnership development, which led to the signing of fewer Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs), with each one having a greater potential for building long-term collaborations.

# 18%

**of institutions in the  
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partnership strategy**

ACE, 2022

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.acenet.edu/Documents/Mapping-Internationalization-2022.pdf>





To facilitate community-engaged learning and research, institutions are developing partnerships with NGOs that can offer direct engagement in solving global challenges. The University of Utah's Bennion Center for Global Engagement, for example, developed [global learning outcomes](https://bennioncenter.org/about/index.php)<sup>9</sup> that have helped to create important connections between global programming and community-based learning.

Taking an intentional approach to partnership development requires an investment of resources such as staff time, funding for travel, and seed grants. It also requires an assessment of current partnership activities, the outlining of institutional and global engagement needs and goals, and the formation of a partnership strategy.

In line with a comprehensive internationalization approach, **characteristics of strategic partnerships include:**

- ◆ Engagement by faculty from multiple disciplines and a variety of stakeholders
- ◆ Engagement in various types of collaborative activities that have been carefully planned to advance each partner institution's mission and goals
- ◆ A deep commitment from various stakeholders, including upper leadership, at each partner institution to collaborate and expand the range of joint activities to achieve common goals
- ◆ Joint activities offering opportunities that leverage each partner's strengths and resources to effectively advance institutional goals
- ◆ The combining of resources and developing common goals and initiatives that serve to address priorities at the partnering institutions
- ◆ Integration in the culture of each institution that may extend to joint traditions, sports, and connections among offices and staff that are typically not engaged in international partnerships, such as student affairs, libraries, and business units.

<sup>9</sup><https://bennioncenter.org/about/index.php>

# DEVELOPING NEW PARTNERSHIPS: WHERE TO START?



**A FOCUS ON STRATEGY IS NOT NEW.** A [blog by the Institute for International Education](#) (IIE) in 2016 observed that “Strategic international partnerships are a hot topic in higher education right now.”<sup>10</sup> At the same time, as noted above, institutions have struggled to develop an actual plan. Much comes down to knowing where to start.

For institutions with an existing portfolio, an assessment of the current composition will reveal criteria for new partnership development and shape the strategy for each institution in addition to other criteria and goals.

Engaging faculty, administrators, and upper leadership in these sorts of assessments similarly helps in defining the specific criteria to be considered in new partnership development.

“Partnership strategies generally aim to increase the chances of individual partnership success and build an overall partnership portfolio with maximal institutional impact.

—SUTTON AND BRANDENBURG (2022)

<sup>10</sup><https://www.iie.org/Learn/Blog/2016/07/2016-July-International-Partnerships-What-Does-It-Mean-To-Be-Strategic>



In the case where an institution may have few or no institution-wide partnerships, a first step might be to determine where faculty have existing connections internationally. As noted in Terra Dotta's *Creating Global Partnership*, this can begin by collecting information about what already exists and in setting up an advisory committee comprised of faculty with related expertise (Terra Dotta, 2017, pg. 2).

To minimize startup costs, some institutions have partnered with larger institutions or networks with more capacity where much of the work has already been done. For example, a smaller college in Pennsylvania is working with Penn State to join a development initiative in India. Others have joined networks such as the [Babson Collaborative](https://www.babson.edu/professional/entrepreneurship-education/university-opportunities/the-babson-collaborative), an entrepreneurship education membership organization, comprised of 37 institutions in 23 countries.<sup>11</sup>

Others have elected to employ services such as [Gateway](https://gatewayinternational.org/partnerships), which offer consultants that can help create a plan and connect institutions with potential partners.<sup>12</sup>

Once a plan of action is in place, including the investment of resources to develop and manage the process and to incentivize the engagement of stakeholders, there are multiple pathways to pursue:

- 1 Nurturing existing partnerships** that meet the criteria of the strategy, to blossom into partnerships
- 2 Evaluating proposals** from internal stakeholders, alumni, or other institutions and evaluate them for potential fit based on specified criteria
- 3 Identifying potential partners** that are synergistic according to the institution's international partnership strategy and help to develop connections among faculty, administrators, and institutional leadership.

All three approaches can be employed concurrently as part of a strategic plan.

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.babson.edu/professional/entrepreneurship-education/university-opportunities/the-babson-collaborative>

<sup>12</sup> <https://gatewayinternational.org/partnerships>



# CONTINUOUS TRACKING AND ASSESSMENT



**ONE OF THE MOST CHALLENGING TASKS** is the tracking and evaluation of the wide range of collaborative activities for partnerships. The outcomes and goals of a strategy will vary for each institution and can include quantitative and qualitative measurements.

To assist in this process, institutions like Lehigh University have developed web resources for developing and evaluating partnerships. Before approving a renewal, [Lehigh's Office of International Affairs and Faculty Committee on Global Affairs](#) considers five factors: level of activity, student mobility, faculty mobility, faculty research & publications, and shared grants.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>13</sup> <https://global.lehigh.edu/gpsi/initiating-evaluating-partnerships>



The [Medical University of South Carolina](https://web.musc.edu/about/global-health/global-partnerships/evaluating-a-global-partner) similarly provides a website for evaluating potential partnerships, which can also be used on the backend to assess success. Questions include: “What are the expected and measurable qualitative and/or quantitative outcomes for this partnership? What is the plan for reporting progress toward specific joint goals? How will the partners identify and track metrics of success?”<sup>14</sup>

Additionally, the ACE notes that the overall functionality and health of a partnership should be evaluated such as the effectiveness of communication, level of engagement by each of the stakeholders, and any changes in respective commitment levels (Helms, 2015).

Many global offices have developed home-grown assessment processes and digital tools to track and analyze activities. At a national level, government-supported agencies such as the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) and the Norwegian Agency for International Cooperation and Quality Enhancement in Higher Education have developed partnership assessment mechanisms that are required for government funding (Klahr, 2017).

A new framework, also developed in Europe, [EVALUATE](https://international.ku.dk/pdf-dokumenter/EVALUATE_handbook_FINAL.pdf)<sup>15</sup>, provides a comprehensive handbook for quality assurance assessment specifically for strategic partnerships. At Penn State, colleagues have gathered information from several institutions in the U.S. regarding partnership assessment and plan to use the EVALUATE Framework to build an in-house process.

<sup>14</sup> <https://web.musc.edu/about/global-health/global-partnerships/evaluating-a-global-partner>

<sup>15</sup> [https://international.ku.dk/pdf-dokumenter/EVALUATE\\_handbook\\_FINAL.pdf](https://international.ku.dk/pdf-dokumenter/EVALUATE_handbook_FINAL.pdf)



# MOVING FORWARD

**AS HIGHER EDUCATION** is emerging from the pandemic and reconsidering priorities in the context of the societal, environmental, and geopolitical changes the world has been experiencing during these uncertain times, a new vision for strategic partnerships has become apparent.

In this new era, it is largely agreed that the focus of partnership development should be on the broader impact and outcomes of the collaborations to address global challenges. Funding agencies are increasingly making direct links to initiatives such as the UN Sustainable Development Goals, which are shifting priorities for partnership development.

Developing a strategy and process for facilitating and evaluating this impact are critical new responsibilities for global offices. Otherwise, it is largely agreed that partnerships will not serve as the catalysts for change that higher education is seeking to address regarding a sustainable future.



# WANT TO **LEARN MORE?**

**IT CAN BE OVERWHELMING** for busy SIOs to begin the process of rethinking their partnership strategies. A few resources that can serve as a starting point include:



**ACE Internationalization in Action:  
International Partnerships**



**IIE Center for International Partnerships**



**NAFSA's Guide to International Partnerships**



**For Managing Global Partnerships**



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