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Authors

Julius, Daniel J
Leventhal, Mitch

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**SINO-AMERICAN JOINT PARTNERSHIPS:
Why Some Succeed and Others Fail**

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Daniel J. Julius and Mitch Leventhal*
State University of New York

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ABSTRACT

This article examines institutional and demographic variables associated with successful joint partnerships between US and Chinese institutions of higher education. Understanding those variables requires an appreciation of overarching issues or catalysts bringing both nations together and, as well, how postsecondary environments differ and the implications of such differences for success. The authors do not assume complete alignment in the interests promoting cooperation between the U. S. and China, but a convergence of mutual interests. The paper discusses different operational realities leading to partnerships between smaller private and larger public institutions and the authors identify factors (forces promoting cooperation, need for alignment in organizational infrastructure, faculty support and what are referred to as “administrative nuts and bolts”) associated with meaningful and long term agreements. Although it may sound trite, this paper argues an essential ingredient for success is leadership, but not in the traditional sense of the word as it is often used in academic environments. Leadership in this context entails using power and influence to change the status quo and assign resources to new ventures. The essay further argues that absent faculty support (which goes hand in hand with resources for faculty), partnerships will not flourish. Finally, the role of an “internal advocate” i.e., one who has the requisite organizational authority and stature, who can overcome organizational inertia, petty territorial jealousies and legitimize international cooperation using, in the best and fullest sense of the word, the “support” of the President or Chancellor, and sometimes the governing board, is fundamental to success.

Keywords: Chinese Higher Education, International Branch Campuses, Higher Education Hubs

This essay explores joint partnerships between U.S. and Chinese institutions of higher education. More specifically, we endeavor to identify the factors (historical, political, and organizational) associated with effective and successful U.S.-Sino post-secondary relationships. Our observations are predicated on over twenty-five years of active involvement in the higher education sectors of these two nations.

By partnerships and exchanges we are discussing an organizational landscape larger than that concerned with the development of U.S. campuses in the People’s Republic of China (PRC). For example, Duke University’s campus in Kunshan or NYU in Shanghai. While these joint ventures certainly fall under the umbrella of our topic, they are relatively unique; only a handful of U.S. institutions have the resources and inclination to invest millions building campuses abroad, or are offered multi-million dollar subsidies and concessions by host country authorities. These joint relationships are, however, worth studying carefully. After all, during the 1980’s scores of American universities spent huge sums constructing overseas campuses in Japan. Today, only one or two of these branches are still operating. The success or failure of U.S. campuses overseas are dependent on factors above and beyond those normally encountered by the hundreds of colleges and universities currently promoting scholarly, student or joint degree partnerships with the PRC.

* Dr. Daniel J. Julius is Executive Director of the Levin Institute at the State University of New York, Visiting Scholar at the University of California Berkeley, Center for Studies in Higher Education and Visiting Professor, Department of Educational Administration & Policy Studies, University at Albany. Dr. Mitch Leventhal has recently been appointed Professor of Professional Practice & Entrepreneurship at the University at Albany, Department of Educational Administration & Policy Studies. He formerly served as Vice Chancellor for Global Affairs at the State University of New York System Administration.

In our discussion of factors associated with partnerships and exchanges we also acknowledge vastly different operational realities that frame engagement between, for example, smaller private liberal arts universities and land grant institutions. Such operational differences should not come as a surprise, given different missions, funding sources, governance structures, roles of faculty, nature of authority and how it is exercised, the sophistication of experience of those engaged in joint endeavors, all vary widely in different organizational environments.

We are therefore cautious in our generalizations, taking care to ensure they are pertinent to many types of partnerships in different genres of colleges and universities. Nor are we unaware of the challenges to U.S.-Sino cooperation posed by the ebb and flow of geopolitical tensions. For example, the galloping trade imbalances, different responses and attitudes concerning the legitimacy of certain governments in Africa or the Middle East, how to manage the fragile balance of power in the Asian theater, the extent to which these two countries will compete or cooperate in scientific research, intellectual property copyright and consumer protection, perceptions toward human rights, and perhaps, most salient considering the issue at hand, whether academic freedom as it is known and practiced in western institutions, can be accommodated in the PRC. Other overarching issues, as well, invariably frame ongoing and impending partnerships. The above notwithstanding, we argue that the major geo-strategic and geo-economic issues pressing world leaders today, climate change, energy policy, nuclear proliferation, the study of oceans, ice caps and agriculture, geopolitical conflict, are global problems demanding international solutions. These simple truths underscore the necessity and importance of Sino-American Cooperation. Our position is one of support for closer engagement and in identifying cultural and institutional factors associated with the maintenance of successful partnerships. We begin with the context for engagement.

The Context for Engagement

Partnerships, academic exchange and research collaboration between the U.S. and the PRC have evolved to a feverish pitch. Rapid acceleration of individual and institutional relationships it is argued, have led to enhanced research productivity, student and faculty mobility, tuition revenues, cross cultural understanding, appreciation of an increasingly international world, and integration between the U.S. and the next emerging superpower.

Academic engagement with the PRC also fits into broader geopolitical objectives, established following WWII, and buttress a complex system of alliances, checks and balances in the Asian theater, which promote regional stability. Asian nations, including the PRC, are acutely sensitive to these alliances, and are not (privately) anxious to see the U.S. withdraw due to heightened anxiety about regional instability should a power vacuum develop in the absence of a U.S. presence. Academic engagement is also a reflection of the integration of Chinese and U.S. markets, which have resulted in overall economic prosperity, despite the challenges, and the recognition, particularly as the U.S. markets endeavor to adjust to current downturns, that our economies are inextricably linked for better or worse.

Relationships with the PRC take many forms. Indeed, it is difficult to ascertain how many institutions are involved, or in what manner. According to a recent study by the Institute of International Education, China is the largest supplier of international students to countries around the world. As of 2010, the PRC has overtaken India as the largest source of international students studying in U.S. institutions. At many elite American schools, for example, the University of Southern California, Columbia, Stanford, MIT, NYU Polytechnic, Brandeis, Rice, Pratt Institute, total enrollments reflect above 20% international, with high percentages from China. IIE data suggest that undergraduates from China have increased by 43% since 2006. The number of Americans studying in China has increased 500% over the past decade and China now ranks as the 7th most popular destination for Americans studying abroad. China itself ranks 5th as a study destination; the U.S. still ranks first.

The number of Chinese scholars and teachers engaged in research and related activities at U.S. colleges and universities have followed similar upward trends, with approximately 30,000 Chinese scholars now in America. China, South Korea and India also account for approximately half of all foreign graduate students in the U.S.

Insofar as internationalization of American campuses, according to the NAFSA: Association of International Educators, 91% of American institutions offer study abroad opportunities, up from 65% in 2001 (although institutions are less likely to receive external funding for international efforts, have foreign language requirements for graduation, or require courses with a global or international focus). Currently, 72% of doctoral granting institutions offer Chinese undergraduate language program and, of American institutions offering joint degrees or degree programs abroad, China ranks first at 40%. The estimate for joint MBA partnerships alone runs into the hundreds. Of course "engagement" varies widely and includes Universities who fund facilities, programs, faculty and campuses, to those who consider a visit by several Deans and a handful by transfer students to be emblematic of "active" engagement.

Understanding opportunities, pitfalls and the future direction of international exchange with the PRC suggests a need for assessment of organizational characteristics and attributes associated with successful partnerships. Understanding and identifying those variables requires an appreciation of two overarching issues, the catalysts bringing the Chinese and American together and, secondly, how U.S. and Chinese post-secondary environments differ.

Forces Promoting Cooperation

To understand what propels Chinese partners to cooperate requires acknowledgement and accommodation of Chinese perceptions of self-interest; economic growth and territorial integrity. Given the history and culture of the Chinese, they are motivated to be independent and secure from external parties tempted to enter China. Whether this entails building a “Great Wall” or present day military modernization, this sentiment drives behavior. Economic growth is also fundamental to internal stability, the latter a sensitive and important concern in China. Developing “world class” Universities and a modern educational system are viewed as a *sine qua non* for stability, security and economic growth. At the turn of the 20th century, the world sought partnerships with “world class” institutions in France, England, and Germany that often reflected the influence of colonial relationships and academic standards of Europe. Today, the U.S. system is the model most seek to emulate, including the Chinese. It is also the case that Chinese universities are now confronting a series of challenges which in part may be alleviated through increased engagement with U.S. institutions. As John A. Douglass has observed in a recent paper, these problems concern increased income disparity and economic opportunity between rural and urban areas, a rising demand for access to universities, growing enrollment coupled with growing unemployment for graduates, as well as governance, academic quality and leadership tensions in Chinese colleges and universities.

American colleges and universities approach Chinese partners for somewhat different reasons. Here we distinguish between various sectors of the post-secondary establishment. Smaller to mid-sized private colleges and universities (a few publics as well), enter the Chinese market primarily for tuition revenues, and secondarily to enhance student and faculty exchange, or reap other benefits associated with international exchange. Consortium arrangements and programs offered by independent providers and brokers are becoming more common with this group in an effort to enhance these arrangements. A number of religiously affiliated institutions and orders, some of whom have had a presence in Asia for centuries, and whose objectives are less propelled by economic than by cultural and religious dictates are also active.

Larger public and private universities may have initially been drawn to the PRC through individual faculty engaged in collaborative research. While the lure of tuition dollars is not unimportant, public Universities in particular are often more constrained in entrepreneurial endeavors involving higher tuition. This sector is primarily motivated by enhancing research competitiveness, recruiting faculty and students to high demand areas (where there is capacity) or cooperation on applied scientific endeavors. Providing access for study abroad, cross cultural exchange or opportunities for students to study in a nation with the world’s fastest growing economy is of interest for those who can afford robust international programs. Of course, the finest American institutions continue to attract top scholars and students from the PRC simply by being one of a tiny handful of truly world class universities.

It is immeasurably harder, however, to establish relationships and attract Chinese students to institutions not ranked in the top tier or located in less desirable cities or regions. Lastly, the for-profit sector is beginning to enter the PRC. In nursing and related health care areas, where high demand exists domestically, and Chinese students can access funds to pay higher tuition, become credentialed, and obtain cherished jobs in the U.S.

Navigating a Different System

The institutional environment in China differs from the U.S. While most American schools have challenges associated with funding, particularly in the public sector, the PRC is pumping billions of dollars, roughly a 20% increase in funding every year over the past decade) into its post-secondary sector. Moreover, over the past 10 years the number of Chinese institutions has doubled, from 1,022 to 2,263. Project 985, a relatively new initiative, will result in an additional US \$6 billion invested into the top 40 institutions. The Ministry of Higher Education has proposed another five-year plan for development in this sector.

History is, however, ever present. Even though most senior Chinese leaders experienced the dangers of centralized planning and control (and may privately speak of a calamitous Cultural Revolution and Great Leap Forward) and appear to be genuinely committed to reform, the University President in China still reports to a party official. Nearly all Chinese colleges and Universities (and those who study and work in them) are regulated in ways unimagined to many in the U.S. This is the case with regard to mission, where and whether new facilities are built, campus location, entrance requirements, when university faculty and leaders travel, and the like.

While current reforms and modernization are having a discernible impact, particularly at elite Chinese institutions, bureaucracy and hierarchy are quickly discerned by American partners. Who greets whom, who sits where, who speaks in turn, are nuanced and delicate matters. Visiting Americans, including University Presidents, may be greeted with fanfare and a splendid banquet, but not meet with anyone with authority to make decisions. How a Chinese partner is approached can be more important than the substantive nature of the engagement. Twin key phrases, harmony and balance, presage a cautious and deliberative decision-making process on one hand, versus a more immediate desire for Chinese schools (and their leaders) to be “recognized” as worthy of international partners. Partnerships are stratified however, and elite Chinese institutions are, by and large, interested in joining forces only with schools perceived to be of similar (or superior) stature in the U.S.

In fact, the nature and tenor of the U.S.–Sino relationship is changing in subtle ways and many in the U.S. would do well to appreciate the nuances. The era of “informing” the Chinese what would be best or simply absorbing more Chinese and charging higher tuition may be ending. U.S. schools, particularly the regional publics and smaller less prestigious privates who are serious about longstanding partnerships will have to reinforce the administrative architecture, funding incentives, websites, involvement of full time faculty, dormitory and food service accommodations and the like, in order to attract and retain Chinese students.

Too many Chinese leaders view past efforts to establish partnerships as little more than glorified junkets with very little being accomplished other than signing an agreement about future intentions.

Further, while many U.S. institutions embrace “internationalization”, a gap exists between the rhetoric and reality. Whether institutional policies actually include international goals, the extent to which full-time faculty are involved and senior managers from student affairs, finance or the Provost’s office actually support international initiatives in practice, whether admission standards and quality measures are enforced, the curriculum reflects diverse perspectives, whether joint programs, degrees or exchanges are supported with hard dollars, adequate facilities and full-time staff, elucidate differences between ability versus a desire to truly engage.

In too many colleges and universities, particularly where the motive to engage is driven primarily by the desire to capture tuition revenue, the partnership is often dependent on the President or one Dean. In these cases the departure of one or two senior people can lead to a slow decline and eventual end to relationships because engagement in these instances is personality dependent, not institutionalized, and may not have been initially supported by other senior administrators or faculty.

In fact, these situations can, unfortunately, regress to outright hostility toward prior relationships. Such sentiments surface because key individuals or constituencies may have resented the flow of resources or personnel previously assigned to the partnership; some feeling “they” weren’t properly consulted initially, or that scarce resources could have been used to shore up existing programs. Those charged with oversight for international responsibilities later take the position that initial promises did not materialize, not acknowledging they may not have followed through on recommended actions.

The above caveats notwithstanding, the following institutional characteristics, factors and processes are associated with successful partnerships and joint endeavors by U.S. universities.

Success Factors

1. Sustained Leadership and an Internal Advocate

Academic organizations often regress to a “status quo.” In other words, the adoption of new programs or maintenance of creative partnerships requires a President or Chancellor willing to advocate for creative change, innovation or signal approval that it is alright to challenge longstanding or entrenched interests and constituencies. People in most organizations, including colleges and universities, favor established processes and known routines. Anyone who has endeavored to introduce curricular or programmatic change knows that faculty themselves, when dealing with new ideas about areas they consider under their purview (and this is a large area indeed in U.S. institutions) can be inherently conservative. Moreover, the bureaucracy associated with academic governance can be excruciatingly time consuming. While faculties often lament a lack of consultation, to do so correctly can take months, even years, and new opportunities are often lost due to an inability of key constituencies in academic organizations to come to consensus or closure on programmatic initiatives.

Developing or maintaining successful international exchanges and partnerships, engagement beyond the “university community”: is, we believe, an area where the active support of a President or Provost is necessary for success. More specifically, this support must include the ability to verbally communicate why international engagement is important, what

"success" in this realm entails, how these initiatives align with the broader mission of the institution or system. Support in this context also includes a willingness to hold others accountable (or incentivize or otherwise persuade those who may be skeptics).

The reason why the active support of a senior leader, particularly during the initial phases of establishing partnerships and exchanges, is so critical has to do with competition for resources; hard dollars as well as the time and effort of faculty and staff. After all, international engagement requires the redirection of internal resources and also requires, in many cases, an increase in workload.

Leaders unable or unwilling to articulate the importance of redirecting funding, time and energies risk having international endeavors fail.

Competition for resources and people (even in cases where partnerships may result in new revenue streams) is a major reason why a senior individual who serves as an internal lead, or internal "champion" is important. This role is essential for success. Petty jealousies, tensions on campus or distrustful relationships between campus and system offices, or "territoriality" legendary in academic organizations, can derail a good idea. The internal lead, normally a person with credibility between academic and administrative offices, or an outsider with resources and the ear of the President is the person who must navigate through an organizational maze of people and committee structures. In many universities this is a person who ensures whether or not the grand ideas of the Chancellor or Provost actually get implemented.

Three observations are germane with regard to the role and effectiveness of the internal champion or lead administrator for international efforts. The first is the importance that individuals credibility and ability to locate resources. Second, having or developing a system wide or campus plan where expectations and goals are clearly set forth with metrics established to assess actions. Third, where plans are not concrete or universally accepted, a process must be organized (and adequately funded) to provide key leaders and constituencies the opportunity to engage in planning and implementation discussions that surface essential concerns. Goals cannot be imposed but must be embraced and the importance of "legitimation" which must include faculty cannot be underestimated in academic environments. In this regard, the leadership of the President or Chancellor, and often the support of the governing board, is crucial.

2. *The Need for Alignment in Organizational Infrastructure*

Effective partnerships, joint programs, and other international efforts, demand more than a plan, a process to gain support, or an office assigned the responsibility to effectuate programs. They cannot succeed without the support of individuals who will address program capacity, legal and immigration matters, student preparedness, housing, transportation, ESL, outreach and other issues that envelop internationalization on campus. What this means practically speaking is that people and the policies supporting internationalization, must be in alignment. By alignment we mean policies that are supportive of ultimate goals and programs.

International efforts that bypass legal, financial, or risk management offices can result in those offices undermining, opposing or simply being unable to support international efforts because such efforts fail to accommodate legal, financial or risk management mandates. Also important in this context might be the willingness of the chief financial officer to ensure a significant portion of funds generated from international enrollments are in fact returned to those programs, units or schools responsible for maintaining and growing such relationships. It is often a wise idea to carefully review funding sources and economic assumptions for projections for international endeavors ahead of time as predictions, demanded by those who maintain bottom lines, may not come to pass for a variety of legitimate reasons, thereby making international efforts vulnerable to criticism. The question; "are there reasonable prospects for sustainability (and a business plan for such), must be asked and answered. Lastly, on funding, it has been our experience that costs, opportunities, benefits and risks should be adequately identified and mutually shared between each partner and set forth in writing as a basis for continued cooperation. This is crucial in organizations where changes in senior leadership are common.

3. *Faculty Support*

If there is one constant coursing through the literature on partnerships with the PRC (and other nations) it is that absent faculty engagement and support, international efforts do not succeed. While it may be "leaders" who dine at fancy banquets, agreeing to overall terms and intent, it is the faculty who have sustained contact and interaction with foreign students and faculty.

In essence, the faculty point of view might be summed up as follows: “do not make promises we cannot keep!” In more mature institutions, where shared governance and curricular oversight by faculty are taken seriously, it is not feasible to engage academically without their support. Of course the roll of Deans and Chairs is also important, particularly in the initial phases of establishing partnerships because they are the people who provide resources (release time to faculty, consideration for rank and tenure, as well as other incentives) without which new academic initiatives cannot be implemented. That being said, it is the faculty who will invariably ask, how do partnerships benefit their colleagues and students presently at the institution, are partner institutions delivering what was promised, do short-term and long-term results measure up, is engagement with the PRC worth the resources (broadly defined) assigned to internationalization?

Those who are serious about international efforts must make additional resources available to those charged with these responsibilities such as assistance to faculty for students who may not have appropriate English skills, funds for travel and for research with colleagues abroad; activities which, we argue, should be considered when reappointment and tenure applications are reviewed.

4. *Administrivia: The Nuts and Bolts*

This category, administrivia, is difficult to define, but without attention to issues discussed below, joint endeavors and partnerships fail to become properly institutionalized and may disintegrate upon the departure of the President, Chancellor or Provost initially in support of a relationship with the PRC. Here we list matters such as the roles and responsibilities (financial and ethical commitments) of the consultants or brokers who serve in crucial roles both in the U.S. and China. Expectations and consulting contacts should be clearly written, monitored and enforceable. A related but important matter concerns joint agreements. Have they been translated and do they say the same thing in English and Chinese? Have these documents been discussed with student affairs, security, financial and legal offices? Are websites updated and complete, and available in English and Chinese to prospective students (and parents in China)? Are those responsible for dormitory and other student housing, and relating living accommodations in the loop and funded. Are they sympathetic, do they understand the scope and extent of their responsibilities?

5. *Communicating with Partners*

For all except the largest and elite institutions ongoing personal interaction is necessary; visits signal a serious intent. Chinese counterparts must be communicated with over time. Those responsible for sustaining relationships in the PRC understand the importance of personal interaction but many in U.S. institutions do not. Leadership changes in the U.S. and China can also have a sustained influence on the willingness of Chinese or American counterparts to support international relationships, another reason for the need for continual communication. Partnerships rarely sustain themselves without ceremonial and cultural activities, developing and nurturing personal relationships by spending time socializing with foreign counterparts and diligently assessing progress. Those who are ambivalent, or oppose international efforts (yes these people exist and often see themselves as responsible stewards of dollars and adherents to the “mission” of the school or system) are prone to undervalue or deride these activities; their parochialism is a constant refrain and strategies to address these internal dynamics must be taken. Success in academic environments requires doing the things that initially brought success in the first place over and over again!

A Final Thought

Academic engagement with the PRC, like economic or military cooperation, is never without tension. Places like Tibet, Sudan, North Korea, Iran, Syria, Zimbabwe, come to mind. Issues such as “nurturing of democracy” or protectionist trade and investment policies are salient in the evolving U.S.-Sino relationship. That being said, our mutual interests in economic integration, the need for secure energy and food supplies, global warming and climate change, military stability in Asia, remain paramount. Academic and political leaders from both nations must find ways to enhance scholarly inquiry and promote meaningful and sustained dialogue and engagement. Ultimately we must rely on science, not politics or power, to elucidate a path to future prosperity, and we must be vigilant in thwarting those who would exploit academic relationships for narrower political aims.

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