

**INNOVATIVE COLLABORATIVE RESEARCH NETWORKS
FOR FACULTY AND STUDENTS**

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Background

Nursing doctoral education internationally has developed rapidly in the past decade. However, due to faculty shortages and resource constraints, many institutions around the world are finding it difficult to allocate time and supports to their faculties to pursue their research, begun during their doctoral education. Faculty members in turn are feeling so burdened with teaching, advisement and administrative duties that they find it hard to give priority to their research. Thus, various international approaches that can facilitate research development in these countries through international collaboration will be welcome developments.

An area that is having significant impact internationally has to do with the initiatives being taken by individuals and institutions across the world. This is an area where a great deal of creativity is being manifested by institutional leaders. Typically, this type of initiative is built on pre-existing individual relationships, where an institution approaches another to develop either a formal or informal partnership. The initiating individual will present the type of objective his/her institution would like to meet, and what their aspirations are in such a relationship. Thus begins a dialogue in which both parties begin clarifying what goals to pursue, what activities are feasible on the short-term and on the long-term, and begin developing strategies for achieving them.

Such alignments may occur between and among institutions that are “equals” in

their standing or on developmental stage, or it may occur between an institution that is less developed and one that has more to offer. Invariably, however, as receptivity of the parties grows to these types of relationships, parties begin to see the strengths that reside in each other, and ways in which both can be enriched by collaborating through a variety of faculty and student exchange relationships. The ways in which each party might benefit from such arrangements are likely to be different, but the opportunities for mutual enrichment are invariably present.

In such instances one has to leave the door open to allow a variety of approaches to emerge, and not aim to do the same thing in the exchange relationship. For example, one institution may wish to send a faculty member to the partner school to work with a colleague to hone research skills and collaborate in research, while the latter might send a doctoral student to the former school to work with a faculty specialist to help refine the dissertation ideas or to learn a particular design or the application of an instrument or a specific analytic technique. Similarly, in a given year an institution may not have a particular need and may not send someone to the partner school, while the other may do so. The extent of the activities need not be equal or parallel in every instance.

A major issue in such instances is funding. Experience shows that several approaches have been used. Some individuals are able to apply to a governmental or private funding agency to facilitate study overseas; others may be able to use a sabbatical period to accomplish the international visit, while others may already have research funding and are able to use such funds to meet expenses.

A Case Study for Initiating International Collaboration and Exchange Across Institutions

It is not a blinding insight to posit that collaboration and exchanges occur and build on existing relationships. Individuals would like to collaborate with those whom they know, have developed a professional or personal relationship with, and have formed the basis for trust. For example, if one were to inquire about how various institutional partnerships and relationships came to be, one will find that someone from institution A went to graduate school with someone in institution B; or that someone in institution A was the mentor for someone in institution B and supervised the person's dissertation. These are naturally excellent foundations on which to begin building. In a similar vein, anecdotal evidence shows that upon completion of a Fulbright, there is much follow on activity and various types of institutional relationships occur between the Fulbright scholar's institution and the host school. The reverse also occurs, in that Fulbright scholars will seek to go to institutions where there are prior relationships that have already been established.

Procedures and Criteria

Alternatively, opportunities can be created to lay the foundation for scholars to meet and begin the process of sharing and getting to know one another's work. Toward this end, the University of Michigan initiated a program in 2003. The steps taken were as follows:

1. An invitation was sent to the faculty of the University of Michigan to indicate their interest in collaboratively working with international colleagues for an

intensive week over the summer period. This solicitation specified that there needed to be a faculty team in place, that was developing programmatic research, with the team having at least one senior investigator, along with other faculty and doctoral students or postdoctoral fellows on the team. The team was asked to send the research theme of interest to it.

2. The solicitation yielded six volunteer research teams that met the specifications.
3. A letter of invitation was sent to a number of international institutions, in which the six research themes were listed. The letter invited these schools to nominate one faculty member whose research was in one of the six identified areas. The person may be a senior or junior faculty member. The letter identified the goal of the weeklong workshop as aiming to initiate international research collaboration among our respective faculties. In sending a faculty member, the institution made a commitment to facilitate the person's collaborative research upon her/his return home, in terms of time provided for the collaboration or in facilitating the search for funding sources from the home country and the region.
4. A selection process was undertaken, with the senior faculty member from each of the six teams participating. The nominations and the supporting materials were so superb and so carefully presented that the team focused mainly on identifying those that presented the best fit with the research being conducted at Michigan.
5. This process yielded 11 scholars who visited the University of Michigan for seven days. Their institutions paid for travel, and the University of Michigan paid for room and board.

The Weeklong Workshop

The majority of the weeklong workshop was spent in intensive work among the small groups with one of the six research teams. Each team had one to four scholars assigned. The teams assumed responsibility for how the time would be spent, but in all cases, there was sharing of one another's research programs and work to date, and discussion on the theoretical foundations and specific methodologic approaches used. There were some site visits to agencies to see specific patient populations, appointments with other experts in the area or within the institution, or demonstration of how specific interventions were applied.

At the end of each day all visiting scholars convened together for a final session and a special presentation/discussion was planned. These included an overview of proposal preparation, how to conceptualize a research problem and develop a theoretical rationale, and an overview of international funding sources. Evenings were spent as social time with dinners hosted by various faculty and administrators of the host institution.

Some teams used the week to prepare a collaborative research proposal, while others used the time to re-think their direction and committed themselves to start proposal preparation upon return home. Many of the teams are in continuing contact as to their next steps.

It is important to recognize the influence of participants' previous academic and research work, and their experiences within their institution of origin, upon the value of the workshop for each of them. In addition, managing the English language was a salient issue for participant satisfaction with the workshop. Aside from issues of

language, three positive themes emerge from the lived experience: (a) The genuine opportunity to discuss, free from prejudice, shared theoretical and methodological difficulties with colleagues in a supportive environment; (b) the willingness of participants to apply their skills and talents to improve the scholarly work of others; and (c) a constructive environment in which participants could demonstrate useful theoretical and methodological ideas from their own work. Undoubtedly, discussion between paired academics is one of the best strategies for new researchers to clarify their ideas and advance their research projects.

Evaluation

A short follow-up questionnaire allows us to assess the short-term impact of the workshop held at the University of Michigan. Responses demonstrate a general trend toward the establishment of collaborative research efforts among involved individuals and universities. Questionnaire results revealed three significant factors which influence such efforts: (a) time scarcity; (b) personal motivation among researchers; and (c) an institutional orientation that seeks tangible and beneficial outcomes for the fields of nursing research, education and practice in return for institutional support. Cultural issues were stressed as salient variables that may be approached on common research problems.

Visiting faculty were overwhelmingly positive, pointing to the workshop as a time to get away from daily commitments and to think only about nursing research; some stated that their horizons were broadened and that they developed new insights and new ways of seeing the problem of interest; many expressed the view that without

this opportunity they would not have been able to begin the process of international collaboration.

The group as a whole noted with great satisfaction that it was a unique opportunity for them to get to know and share views with other participants from seven different countries, and there was some discussion among them regarding collaboration among themselves. They expressed appreciation to the faculty of the host school for their dedication to the entire process.

Nevertheless, participants did not mention specific ways to overcome identified barriers to the development of collaborative projects. However, several general strategies were present in their comments:

- 1) It is necessary to negotiate with university administration for time specifically dedicated to research activities. Research activities should comprise 30% or more of the researcher's contract time, depending on funding status and other assignments.
- 2) Master's and doctoral level students should be included on research teams to assume responsibility for various aspects of research projects, and provide them with learning experiences. Their inclusion will facilitate the accomplishment of research goals.
- 3) It is necessary to present research problems with clarity, based on the research priorities of participant countries. Following the establishment of clear research themes, linkages should be established with senior researchers whose

work is in similar themes or areas. Cultural aspects of research problems should be considered within the context of research proposals.

The faculty of the University of Michigan were similarly pleased with the outcome and expressed the hope that there will be concrete outcomes as follow-up. They did point to the fact that it was hard work, yet highly worthwhile. A number of teams had doctoral students participating in the discussions. Some of these students had previously not had the opportunity to work with international scholars and pointed to the personal and professional enrichment the workshop and interactions brought to their scholarly work.

At the time of this writing one proposal has been submitted by a team; in the case of another team, discussions are under way for a visiting scholar to send a doctoral student to work and study with the team she herself worked with to facilitate the student's dissertation proposal development. This is a most promising beginning three months after the end of the workshop. Time will tell what other follow-on collaborative projects will evolve. We do know from the evaluations that a good foundation has been provided on which to build. Should circumstances allow, a repeat will be considered in several years, inviting several of the scholars from the first workshop and adding new individuals to the group.

This experience demonstrates the way in which this type of initiative can contribute to international collaborative research among colleagues and provide a supportive environment within which ideas can be nurtured to initiate research. The challenge is for each individual to continue what was begun, so that health problems in the respective countries can be addressed.

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