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# International Collaboration in Higher Education: Using the Systems Thinking Approach to negotiate a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU): The case West Chester University, West Chester, PA, and University Rafael Landívar, URL, Guatemala

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Title:

**International Collaboration in Higher Education:  
Using the Systems Thinking Approach to negotiate a Memorandum of  
Understanding (MOU):  
The case West Chester University, West Chester, PA,  
and University Rafael Landívar, URL, Guatemala**

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**Abstract**

We are living in a world that is increasingly getting closer and more interconnected than ever before. Internationalizing the university campus has become both a challenge and a need. Students face a very competitive global market after graduation, and they need to leave the university with the skills and knowledge global mindset that will allow them to be successful in their careers.

International partnerships and collaborations are the best ways to offer opportunities for future graduates to become global citizens. Therefore, the approach in which the MOU is negotiated is vital for a fructiferous and long lasting relationship that will be mutually beneficial for students, faculty and administrators of both institutions.

Professors Sanchez and Arias-Zelidón received a grant from the College of Arts and Sciences of West Chester University to negotiate a MOU between West Chester University, PA, United States, and University Rafael Landívar, Guatemala. We followed the System Thinking which included a previous research, possible working scenarios and the opportunity to restructure based on mutual learning and understanding. We also used a bottom up approach because faculty members are the main actors that can make the MOU be successful.

In addition, we used the SWOT tool to analyze the data of our research. SWOT stands for strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats, which we used to find common goals and areas of possible collaborations between WCU and URL.

All resources and efforts were placed at times on finding the common good of both institutions instead of focusing on the individual interests, disciplines and areas of research.

Keywords: MOU, System Thinking; SWOT; bottom-up approach; Negotiation in Higher Education

## Resumen

Vivimos en un mundo en el que nos estamos acercándonos cada vez más, una situación que nos interrelaciona unos a otros desde diversos escenarios a nivel mundial. Este hecho ha creado la necesidad de internacionalizar las universidades y se ha convertido en una exigencia y un reto al mismo tiempo. Nuestros estudiantes deben enfrentarse a este mercado global una vez que se gradúan, por lo que deben desarrollar sus destrezas y adquirir el conocimiento global que les permita tener éxito en sus carreras.

Las colaboraciones y convenios internacionales son las mejores oportunidades para que nuestros estudiantes se gradúen siendo ciudadanos globales. En consecuencia, los métodos empleados para negociar un convenio internacional entre dos instituciones son vital importancia para cubrir los diversos rangos multidisciplinares, y obtener acuerdos de mutuo beneficio para el profesorado, los estudiantes, y los administradores de ambas instituciones.

Las profesoras Ana Sánchez and María Elena Arias Zelidón recibieron una beca de la Facultad de Ciencias y Artes de la Universidad de West Chester para negociar un Memorándum de Entendimiento, (Memorandum of Understanding) MOU, entre la Universidad de West Chester, Pensilvania, y la Universidad Rafael Landívar, Guatemala.

Entre los métodos que usamos para desarrollar desde el inicio nuestro trabajo está la disciplina del “Pensamiento Sistémico”, el cual nos permitió evaluar la dirección de la investigación previa. De manera que los datos preliminares ayudaron a determinar las posibles oportunidades de colaboración que se basan en las premisas de comprensión y aprendizaje mutuo. También nos planteamos trabajar en el convenio “desde abajo hacia arriba”, o sea que las reuniones de acercamiento se enfocaron en los profesores, quienes son los actores principales porque su involucramiento va a generar que el convenio sea exitoso.

Además, usamos la herramienta FODA para analizar los resultados de la negociación. FODA nos permitió ver las fortalezas, las oportunidades, las debilidades, y las amenazas que podíamos encontrar para llevar a buen término el MOU y los futuros proyectos de colaboración entre la Universidad de West Chester y la Universidad Rafael Landívar.

En todo momento de la negociación, los recursos y esfuerzos fueron dirigidos a encontrar un bien común para ambas instituciones en vez de enfocarnos en intereses individuales, disciplinas o áreas de investigación.

Palabras claves: Memorándum de Entendimiento; Pensamiento Sistémico; FODA;

Negociación en Educación Superior

Internationalizing the university campus has become both a challenge and a need. Students face a very competitive global market after graduation, and they need to leave the university with the skills and the global mindset that will allow them to be successful in their careers.

International partnerships and collaborations are the best ways to offer opportunities for future graduates to become global citizens. However, in many cases, these partnerships are negotiated with the interested faculty member (s) negotiating at the top level of the administration and focusing on the individual faculty's interest, discipline and areas of research. However, this approach is exclusionary and it does not take into the account the interest of the institution as a whole.

Professors Sanchez and Arias-Zelidón received a grant from the College of Arts and Sciences of West Chester University<sup>1</sup>, (WCU) to negotiate a MOU between WCU and University Rafael Landívar<sup>2</sup> (URL), Guatemala. In order to make the MOU a successful collaboration between universities, all the resources and efforts were placed on the common good of both institutions instead of focusing on the interested faculty's discipline and areas of research. To this end, we decide use the systems thinking

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<sup>1</sup> West Chester University is part of the fourteen universities of the public system of the state of Pennsylvania (PASSHE) . It has two campuses, one in West Chester and the other one in Philadelphia, PA.

<sup>2</sup> The Universidad Landívar is a private university and it has five main campuses and six regional branches throughout Guatemala: Main Campus in Guatemala City, Regional Campus of Quetzaltenango, Regional Campus of San Pedro Claver, S.J. de la Verapaz, Regional Campus of San Roque González de Santa Cruz, S.J. de Huehuetenango, Regional Campus of San Luis Gonzaga, S.J. de Zacapa, Regional Branch of El Quiché, Regional Branch of Antigua Guatemala, Regional Branch of Escuintla, Regional Branch of Jutiapa, Regional Branch of Retalhuleu, and Regional Branch of Coatepeque. Each Campus offers alternatives to solve social and economic problems of each region. This allows the URL to have a strategic education program based on the demands of the region.

method to negotiate the agreement, which allowed them to look for the larger picture rather than individual perspectives and interests.

The systems thinking is an approach used in the business field. It is a holistic approach that looks at both institutions, WCU and URL, as a whole made up of sections, departments, schools, people, and disciplines. It focusses on the relationship among all the parts to identify common goals, plans, interests and needs. The approach has five phases that we followed during the process of negotiations that we use to develop a series of activities for specific purposes. These strategies effectively enriched the view of a positive future. As Peter Senge aims: “Systems thinking is the ability to understand [and sometimes to predict] interactions and relationships...” (2000: 239).

**The first step ‘is to have a persistent commitment to ‘real learning’.**

After a trip to Guatemala, we started to think about the possibility of a partnership between a Guatemalan university and the University of West Chester, PA. There were many aspects about Guatemala that would create great learning opportunities for WCU faculty and students: a) a different language, b) a different culture, c) geographic and ethnic variety, and a rich background history that offer learning opportunities for all WCU departments and schools. At the same time, there were many ways in which WCU could provide learning opportunities for URL students, faculty and staff. It was a mutually beneficial plan for both countries, and institutions. After a search for possible universities that WCU could partner with, we came to the conclusion that the University Rafael Landívar would be the best choice for the following two reasons: a) the university’s commitment to society and its program of community service learning, and b) the various campuses located in various areas of Guatemala, all with a number of



programs and projects to help the communities. It was with those ideas in mind, that we applied for a grant which would give them the opportunity to travel to Guatemala and negotiate the MOU.

In fact, real learning is a process that has to be practiced throughout the entire negotiation process. We need to reinforce and balance the results of each step in order to determine the limiting factors before proceeding to the following phase; for that reason we use different tools of analysis. One of them is the SWOT tool to analyze the data of our research. SWOT stands for strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats, which we used to find common goals and areas of possible collaborations between WCU and URL. In addition, with the data already analyzed, we decided to use a bottom up approach in order to understand information, policies, recommendations and conflicts from the lowest levels of the organization. As Ehrenberg states, it is important to know "the bottom up flow of information and policy recommendations, and conflicts over implementation." (104) Indeed, Faculty members are the main executioners of future collaborations, which is what will make the MOU successful and mutually beneficial.

There was extensive research about how the two universities operate their programs of study, research, service, as well as cultural differences. In addition, the research and analysis were focused on the Administrative and Academic Structure of both universities and their role within their communities. The results gave us the opportunity to see the whole, the complexity of components and interconnection of both institutions. This strategic frame of reference provided us the data to apply for and win a

grant to perform overseas service learning in URL through the University's Department of Community Service.

**The second phase of the negotiation process is what Senge calls 'Mental Models'.**

Mental models are an important part to understand the negotiation process because we need to understand the cultural and academic differences to avoid polarization of the parties involved in the process. It also opens doors for mutual understanding that can lead to more opportunities. According to this phase of the process, we need to be prepared to be wrong, to find aspects which were not foreseen, and most importantly, to keep an open mind. This is the phase where we need to be sensitive to any issues that could arise during negotiations due to cultural differences, language barriers, and already established stereotypes.

These Mental Models are deeply rooted inside us, they are images about we act and understand our world, and these paradigms or conceptions can affect the outcomes of the negotiations if are not willing to accept other models that can offer opportunities, solutions and other alternatives different from ours.

**The third step is to triangulate.**

It is in this phase that we had meetings with the faculty, administrators of each campus to get to know their points of view, their needs and interests. It was the time for presentations about WCU to URL faculty, administrators and staff, and their turn to present their programs and curricular needs and goals. The conversations served to share expectations and experiences and to make sure they were both working towards a common goal. It is in this phase that the two institutions come together to see what

they would not see individually. It is a time for a collective vision of what both universities can do together, and benefit from each other.

During this part of the negotiation process, URL faculty, staff and administrators were actively engaged in discussing their interests, and common points in which collaborations could be developed. These discussions provided a better understanding of the philosophy of URL and how this philosophy is present in every faculty member and the academic programs they offer.

### **The fourth step, 'shared vision'.**

Working with the emphasis of bottom-up approach and bringing people together through differences and similarities was an activity of strategic visioning. A vision shared from our awareness about the multiple possibilities of understanding. A vision increased in every reunion, because the "shared vision" enriched us. The process was based not on an idea, but on ideals. As Senge notes, "Few, if any, forces in human affairs are as powerful as shared vision." (1990:206)

This is the time to commit to the goals, needs and interests of both institutions, and to agree to a common draft of the Memorandum of Understanding. During this stage, a few meetings were scheduled to discuss the language of the draft: a) policies, b) areas of collaboration, c) timelines and d) members of each institution that would be involved in possible collaborations and projects between the two universities.

### **The final phase, called systems thinking**

This phase is the combination of all the aforementioned stages, and it culminates with a draft that includes a wide range of perspectives and conditions from the two parties involved in the process, WCU and URL. This phase culminates with the signing

of the MOU, which will open the door for future collaborations for faculty, students and staff of WCU and URL.

In addition to the draft of the MOU, there were some other outcomes from the negotiation process that will materialize after the signing of the MOU, and will be mutually beneficial. These collaborative projects, which are mentioned below, reflect the common interests, goals and needs of both, WCU and URL.

1. Collaboration with a Doctoral degree. University Rafael Landívar has a Doctorate degree in Law, and WCU has a Nursing Doctorate.

2. One of the strong programs of both universities is Nursing and Therapy. Faculty from URL is interested in developing a student and faculty exchange program in this area. They expressed interest in sharing ideas and learning from each other.

3. The Director of the Languages program was interested in 'a dual immersion program', which consists of establishing conversations with students from WCU using special web software. Students can converse in pairs or in groups, using Spanish for one or half hour and English for another half or one hour. This duo immersion program will allow for enhancing cultural and linguistic skills.

4. An interdisciplinary service learning project which came out of all the negotiations. During the week of March 7 to March 13, 8 WCU students from various disciplines, through the Departments of Social Responsibility and The Department of Student Organizations will travel to the main campus of URL to do community service learning. These two departments operate various community service projects such as sustainable Campus, Nutrition and Health, care and attention to children with learning

and/ or physical disabilities and Habitat for Humanity. URL and WCU students will work on various service learning activities.

5. After the debriefing, Dr. Luis Alberto Lemus, Faculty of Academic Cooperation, Provost Office, he proposed a collaboration project between WCU, URL and the Embassy of the United States in Guatemala. Dr. Lemus was interested in finding a WCU faculty member in the Political Sciences Discipline, which will develop a curriculum about the socio political and economic perspectives of the United States about Latin America.

The use of Systems Learning Approach allowed for a successful negotiation of a partnership between WCU and URL that promises to be a fructiferous, long lasting, multidisciplinary agreement that will benefit students, faculty and staff of both universities.

## **Conclusion**

At the end of the negotiation process we learned the importance of looking at all the constituents that are part of each academic institution and how they interact as a whole rather than focusing on individual parts.

The system thinking approach is the basis for real learning to take place, as Senge puts it: "Organizations learn only through individuals who learn... without it no organizational learning occurs" (1990:139). Thus, participants are one of the most important aspects to create a successful partnership. In this case, all participants were fully involved and open minded in the negotiation process. The two interested parties were willing to accept other mental models to reach common interests, goals, new alternatives and solutions to overcome any unforeseen obstacles.

It was stimulating to discover that even though the URL has various partnerships with other universities worldwide, the MOU negotiations with WCU was the first one that invited participation from faculty, administrators and staff of all URL campuses throughout Guatemala.

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