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Andrew P. Ciganek

Jacksonville State University, aciganek@jsu.edu

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ADDRESSING ENROLLMENT DECLINES THROUGH INTERNATIONAL PARTNERSHIPS

Andrew P. Ciganek
Jacksonville State University
aciganek@jsu.edu

ABSTRACT

The enrollment declines in information systems (IS) related fields over the past several years has led to research that has examined the causes of it and a variety of possible approaches to reverse this trend. With the recent economic downturn resulting in cuts in education budgets, the need to increase enrollments in IS has become critical for many departments in this field. The objective of this research is to discuss how international partnerships can be utilized as an additional means to improve enrollments, which is an approach that has not been addressed before in the literature. The author illustrates the opportunities possible with international partnerships through a case involving an IS department located in the Southeastern United States and multiple universities in Asia. This research then highlights strategies to establish a successful international partnership followed by some concluding remarks.

Keywords

Curriculum, declining enrollments, marketing IS programs, international partnerships

INTRODUCTION

Significant enrollment declines in information systems (IS) related fields have influenced many of the discussions and the directions taken in the field over the past several years. The bursting of the enrollment bubble, which was created in the 1990's by the popularity of Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) software, the Year 2000 (Y2K) problem, and the rise of electronic commerce over the Internet, has perpetuated several myths that persist today despite substantial contradicting evidence (Dick, Granger, Jacobson and van Slyke, 2007; Firth, Lawrence and Looney, 2008; Panko, 2008; Pollacia, Lomerson and Russell, 2008). These declines in enrollment, some quite considerable (Dick et al., 2007; George, Valacich and Valor, 2005; Granger, Dick, Luftman, van Slyke and Watson, 2007; Street, Wade, Bjørn-Andersen, Ives, Venable and Zack, 2008), has forced the IS field to focus on recruiting students to this major for the first time in decades (George et al., 2005).

Recruiting students is a multifaceted task that needs to be addressed in many different ways (Galletta, 2007; George et al., 2005). Marketing efforts that range from identifying an impactful slogan that encapsulates the IS degree (Watson, 2006) to coordinated marketing plans and materials (Dick et al., 2007) have been made available and have had success attracting students. There is also growing evidence that delivering an effective message about the IS field in introductory IS classes can help boost enrollments (Firth et al., 2008; Looney and Akbulut, 2007). Curriculum changes, such as making the IS degree more relevant (Becker, Hassan and Naumann, 2006; Dick et al., 2007) and attracting non-IS majors through flexible degree options (Becker et al., 2006; Dick et al., 2007; Pollacia et al., 2008), have also been successful. Marketing efforts (e.g., creating marketing materials, high school visits, workshop sessions for high school educators and guidance counselors) and curriculum changes (e.g., prerequisite structure, new courses, flexible minors, 100% online courses), which were initiated at a Southeastern United States university over the past two years, have successfully increased the total number of computer science credit hours (see Figure 1). Though this is hardly an exhaustive list of the activities departments are now employing to recruit students, international partnerships is an activity that has not received sufficient attention.

The objective of this research is to discuss how international partnerships can be utilized as an additional means to improve IS enrollments. Several partnership opportunities are illustrated with a case involving an IS department located in the Southeastern United States and multiple universities in Asia. This research then highlights strategies to establish a successful international partnership followed by some concluding remarks.
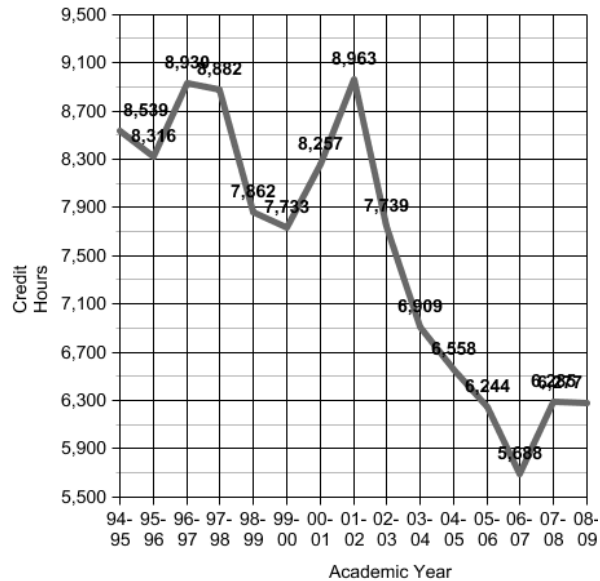
Academic Year	Credit Hours
1994-1995	8539
1995-1996	8316
1996-1997	8930
1997-1998	8882
1998-1999	7862
1999-2000	7733
2000-2001	8257
2001-2002	8963
2002-2003	7739
2003-2004	6909
2004-2005	6558
2005-2006	6244
2006-2007	5688
2007-2008	6285
2008-2009	6277*

∗ 2008-2009 does not include summer 2009 credit hours; summer credit hours averaged 547 over the past five summer terms

Figure 1: Total Computer Science Credit Hours at a Southeastern United States University

INTERNATIONAL PARTNERSHIPS

An international partnership is an agreement to share resources between universities located in different countries. Successful international partnerships typically are mutually beneficial and supported by both universities in the development, delivery, and marketing of the partnership. These partnerships should offer a valuable global experience and both parties should identify a "champion" that is dedicated to the success of the partnership. There are many different ways that an international partnership may materialize, however, the focus of this research examines possibilities specifically for students and faculty that can lead to improved IS enrollments.

International partnerships are illustrated in this research though a specific case in which partnerships were developed between a Southeastern U.S. university and "international" or English-only instruction universities in Asia. Despite this limited focus, the experiences of this case should be transferrable to partnerships with different universities as there are similar challenges faced in establishing any international partnership that are not exclusive to a particular university. Asia was chosen as the target of the department's efforts in this case due to its importance (in terms of population, political influence, and economy), which has increased substantially in the past few years and will likely only continue to grow. Several administrators at Asian universities expressed the sentiment in conversations with the author that American universities (unlike others throughout the world) have not pursued productive relationships with them. As a result, this created an opportunity for the department to distinguish itself from other degrees and other programs.

Students

In this case, there were several partnership opportunities with international universities that the IS department had either recently implemented or were actively pursing that impacts students. The primary objective of these activities is to give students, many of which rarely travel, the chance to live and learn in a different country and impart new abilities and experiences in assimilating to a culture very different from their own. This is a way to make the IS degree much more relevant as these skills are essential for students since local to national economies have become increasingly global and are shaped by influences which cannot be imparted from a textbook or by "Googling" it online. If IS students are to be successful in business with other countries, they need to understand those cultures. These student opportunities include both short and long term exchanges and include offering dual degrees.

Short-term or two-week student exchanges are a low-cost alternative and require much less of a commitment than exchanges that last at least one semester in duration. This partnership is best described as a "student exchange with industry exposure" in which students travel to the foreign university and tour local businesses. This short-term exchange may be employed as one component of a student project, which many programs require students to complete in their senior year of study. In addition, these students attend multiple classes at the foreign university so that they can actually experience (and envision)

what life would be like for them if they attended that institution. For each university, it provides a much diverse audience to market their respective programs to and can create excitement about the degree among students (Galletta, 2007).

Long-term exchanges and dual degrees are the most direct approach of increasing student enrollments through international partnerships. International partners have used these agreements as a reward system for their best students, which is an effective marketing tool for foreign partners and a way for native departments to add high-quality students. For students in native departments that participate in these long-term exchanges, they are offered salaried positions to teach English once they graduate. This is an interesting opportunity for students looking for a "different" experience and is also position in high demand by international partners. Finally, the opportunity to graduate with two diplomas in hand can also be used as an effective marketing tool for both universities to attract new students.

Faculty

There are also several opportunities with international universities which impact faculty that are examined in this case. The primary objective of these activities is to give the department access to a wider pool of resources to support instruction. These opportunities include faculty exchanges and ways to enhance the relevance of the IS curriculum.

Faculty exchange partnerships have been a unique way for an IS department to address the recent economic downturn. Cuts in the education budget have limited the amount of summer support that is available to faculty. Through faculty exchanges, IS faculty have had the opportunity spend the summer teaching in a foreign country instead of waiting and hoping for summer support to become available. Teaching in another country generates a variety of new experiences for faculty that may require agility and innovation in teaching methods. These experiences are brought back home by the faculty and that knowledge can be used to enhance the content in the courses that they offer and make the IS curriculum much more relevant. Shorter-term faculty exchange possibilities also exist where faculty are invited to give lectures and conduct research. These exchanges increase the visibility of an individual IS program overseas, demonstrate the commitment of a program to a partnership, and provides the opportunity to network and create additional partnerships.

The cuts in the education budget have forced some universities to employ a mandatory hiring freeze. For the IS department examined in this case, this has resulted in three faculty vacancies not being filled. These cuts have also limited the number of graduate assistants that are able to be hired, forcing the department to do more with less. Through the faculty exchange partnership, which is funded by the university separately from faculty salaries, an IS department is able to have additional, high-quality faculty on-hand to teach courses. In these instances, these foreign faculty members bring with them a diverse skill sets in a variety of innovative technologies that do not currently exist in some IS departments (e.g., CGI, Gaming, GIS, etc.), thereby improving the relevance of the content that the department can offer.

Joint project involvement can also enhance the relevance of course materials. In this partnership opportunity, teams of students from each university work together on a project to jointly produce a deliverable. This gives students from both universities first-hand experience with the benefits and challenges of working in a virtual team. These experiences are relevant in an increasingly virtual world and are an effective way to enhance course content.

STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESSFUL INTERNATIONAL PARTNERSHIPS

As stated earlier, successful international partnerships generally are mutually beneficial and supported by both universities in the development, delivery, and marketing of the partnership. Some of the considerations that a program should make before initiating an international partnership are listed in Table 1. The first step in establishing a successful partnership, however, is to identify a compatible partner. The case discussed in this research involved an IS department with no former experience with international partnerships. As a result, the department insisted that the university pursue a relationship with students that were proficient in the English language. The purpose of this requirement was to minimize any barriers that could be encountered as a result of language differences. Further, the department required that a "champion" dedicated to the success of the partnership from both universities be identified. The IS department was able to identify a champion in a foreign university through their foreign partner's international office. The champion in these relationships was either the director of the international office or an appropriate counterpart identified by the director.

Having a foreign champion greatly improves the chances for success in an international partnership. It does not take long to know if the person identified as the champion is appropriate as it becomes evident when scheduled meetings with prospective partners are canceled and are never rescheduled. Patience and persistence are important qualities to have when pursing international partnerships. The key in establishing and maintaining a sustainable relationship with a foreign champion is identifying areas of mutual benefit. Some examples of mutual benefit have been described above, but common research interests and whether the project champion receives recognition for participating in the relationship are also important.

There are other concerns that should be addressed to guarantee a successful partnership, such as ensuring that the university administration supports international partnerships. In the IS department examined in this case, the university President was the only administrator hesitant in establishing these relationships. This support was critical as any partnership agreement needed to be signed by the President to be recognized. To help influence his support, the faculty senate at the university drafted and passed a recommendation encouraging more international university agreements and stressed the value that these partnerships had for its students. The President has since supported these arrangements by having signed multiple memorandums of understandings (MOUs). A MOU, a type of agreement usually written in the broadest terms, was the preferred way to formalize international partnerships by the university. The MOU simply proposes a partnership framework to consider and does not commit the university to providing any resources, services, or activities.

Other concerns may exist which are dependent on the type of international partnership pursued. For example, a foreign university that has a semester schedule that does not align closely with the native IS department impacts the type of joint projects that students can work on together and the feasibility of faculty exchanges. As another example, the IS department examined in this research focused on "starting small" since it had no experience initiating international partnerships. This meant starting with student and faculty exchange partnerships over offering a dual degree. This can allow an IS department to grow a healthy working relationship with a foreign partner before venturing into something more advanced, like a dual degree. Although a dual degree is the most direct approach of increasing student enrollments, it involves a greater commitment of time and resources in comparison to establishing exchange relationships.

Much of the effort spent in establishing a dual degree typically is focused on determining the impact that the degree would have on accreditation, mapping the courses to be included in the dual degree, and identifying the best sequence to offer the degree, that is, whether it be a "2+2" (two semesters at home university, two at foreign university) or a "1+2+1" schedule. A "1+2+1" schedule has worked well with foreign universities as students must return home to complete the degree, which makes it easier for students to attain a visa to study in the U.S. (DOS, 2008). A great deal of the effort to establish a dual degree, however, can be done online and at a distance.

Resources: This addresses how capable your department is at establishing a successful international partnership. The following questions that address this are: • Does our university provide sufficient resources (e.g., administration, financial, etc.)? • Does our university either recognize and/or encourage international partnerships? • How many students are currently served by our university's English learning program? • What type of international partnerships does our university currently have in place? **Interest**: This addresses the motivation within the department to foster a successful international partnership. Some questions that answer this include: • How will an international partnership benefit our program? • How could our program benefit an international partner? • How many faculty members within our department are willing to get involved to support this partnership? • Is there someone in our department willing to champion this partnership effort? • Which of our faculty members has international experience and/or connections? **Constraints**: Understanding these will help your department focus on the type of partnership it should pursue. There are multiple types of international partnerships available (e.g., short term, long term student and faculty exchanges, dual degrees, etc), but they are limited by resources and interest (see above). Additional constraints may include: • How soon is our department willing to start an international partnership? • What are the differences (e.g., schedule, course offerings, etc.) between our program and our international partners'? • Are the students of the international partner proficient in English?

Table 1: Considerations Before Initiating an International Partnership

CONCLUSION

The enrollment declines in IS related fields over the past several years is an issue that impacts the entire discipline and has been exacerbated by the recent economic downturn. IS departments are increasingly taking on the role of actively recruiting students, which is a multifaceted task that can be addressed in many different ways. The objective of this research was to examine how international partnerships can be utilized as an additional means to improve enrollments. The opportunities to attract new students were illustrated with a case involving an IS department located in the Southeastern United States and multiple universities in Asia. International partnerships have not been addressed before in the literature and should be viewed as another tool at the disposal of IS departments to recruit new students.

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