

## CHAPTER 39

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# OPERATIONALIZING THEORY INTO PRACTICE

## A Look at the International Projects Office

**Elise S. Ahn**  
*International Projects Office*

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### ABSTRACT

The UW–Madison International Projects Office (IPO) was established in 2017 to facilitate the development and management of internationally focused projects and partnerships requiring collaboration between two or more UW units with diverse institutional partners. More broadly, IPO develops and facilitates work that benefits organizations worldwide while forging international ties to build and maintain robust foundations for cooperation and collaboration between UW and other organizations. Since its establishment, the office’s work has included several different types of partnerships—other higher education institutions, governments, nongovernmental organizations, and foundations. To guide its partnership engagement, this chapter specifically highlights IPO’s theories of partnership and change which it utilizes to guide its partnership development engagements. These theories were built on learnings from existing partnerships and are grounded in UW–Madison’s organizational values, mission, and institutional culture. Utilizing these theories has also enabled IPO to explore a diversity of potential partnerships and respond to emerging opportunities in contextually relevant and flexible ways.

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## INTRODUCTION

Internationalization is often invoked in strategic plans as being integral to the work of higher education institutions (HEIs). As Fischer (2019) found, as of 2011, 60% of U.S. HEIs indicated that internationalization was a high priority in their strategic plans. However, despite articulated interest among HEIs (both in and outside the United States) to internationalize, there is, in fact, no singular route to achieving an internationalized campus. HEIs may engage in any number of activities to internationalize, which may include: increasing international student and faculty populations; facilitating student mobility (in-bound and outbound); developing international and area studies centers; establishing international branch campuses (IBCs); internationalizing the curriculum through more inclusion of materials from the Global South and minority/underrepresented scholars/writers as well as through language education (Nolan & Merzk, 2015; Olds, 2018). HEIs may also choose to engage in closer institutional ties through the creation of dual degree or partnership/pipeline degree programs and developing a consortium of HEIs that would allow for the aforementioned activities related to student/faculty mobility and/or sharing learning opportunities.

More recently, questions regarding the current model were being raised even before the SARS-CoV-2 (COVID-19) global pandemic (Fischer, 2019) and amplified during and in the period following the pandemic. Even before the pandemic, there was a growing acknowledgement among higher education administrators and the field *writ large* that asymmetrical approaches of engaging in internationalization were unsustainable in the long-term given geopolitical shifts toward multipolarity (Hawawini, 2016; Olds, 2018). These transitions in shifting geopolitical power continues to be compounded by the twin realities of significant demographic shifts in both the Global North and South and the changing nature of work.

Considering these changing dynamics, Sutton (2010) posited that there needed to be a change in thinking about internationalization in higher education, that is, that universities needed to shift from focusing inwardly to extending outward and positioning themselves within “global networks of learning, discovery and engagement” (p. 60). She further argued that partnerships themselves needed to move from being transactional to transformational (Sutton, 2010). In considering ways to operationalize this charge, this type of shift in partnership models requires the articulation of intentions and focus on longer-term outcomes. Adopting Knight’s (1994) definition of *internationalization*—the process of integrating international, global and/or intercultural dimensions into the core enterprises of the university (research, teaching, and learning)—this chapter discusses one way that the UW–Madison International Projects Office (IPO) has been

engaging in building what Sutton (2010) referred to as *transformational partnerships*. The chapter discusses how the IPO staff has developed and operationalized theories of partnership and change in practice.<sup>1</sup> These theories were developed informed by learnings from existing partnerships and are underpinned by UW–Madison’s organizational values, mission, and institutional culture. Utilizing these theories has given IPO a framework to explore a diversity of potential partnerships and respond to emerging opportunities in more contextually relevant and flexible ways.

### **WHY THEORY? USING THEORY TO INFORM PARTNERSHIP BUILDING**

There has been increasing focus on the role (and value) of scholar-practitioners within the academy broadly and among international education administrators specifically. Streitwieser and Ogden’s (2016) edited volume highlighted how international education administrators are integrating theories related to learning, intercultural communication and competence, and transition to inform tools and approaches to engaging in various areas within international education, for example, study abroad/student mobility, intercultural competence and curriculum-related activities. However, in relation to partnerships, the supports for international education administrators range from toolkits to case studies, that is, describing partnership histories and structures (American Council on Education, n.d.; Al-Youbi et al., 2020). The use of theory in partnership development and engagement remains scarce. The dearth of theoretical ways of information international partnership development and an emphasis on practice, that is, implementation or operationalization of partnerships, has resulted in less consideration for the invisible factors informing, developing, or rejecting partnership opportunities, for example, values and mission.

Adopting Brown’s (1976) perspective of theory as metaphor, that is, theory as a “non-spatial mimesis for (not *of*) the extensional world” (p. 180), developing theories of partnership and change provide a vision of how different assumptions and activities may be connected to particular outcomes. As Sandelands (1990) observed, “[t]heory involves *knowing that* certain things follow from other things ... practice involves *knowing how* to make certain things” (p. 237). Put another way, Sandelands posited that

theory enters practice in something like the way art enters experience. Just as art consists of an arrangement of materials (e.g., colors, shapes, sounds) which can (but need not) call to mind certain impulses and feelings in beholders, so too theory consists of an arrangement of ideas (e.g., concepts, propositions) which can (but need not) call to mind certain actions and feelings in practitioners. And, just as contact with art may bring out new

ways of seeing or feeling, so too contact with theory may bring out new ways of practice. (p. 254)

By creating a framework for understanding linkages between partnership components, utilizing a theory-driven or informed approach to partnership development may then provide a number of benefits to higher education administrators including: providing a taxonomy or model to understand the work at hand by establishing linkages between engagement-related activities and outcomes; allowing for greater inclusion and participation of various stakeholders by clarifying who is involved in the partnership; and in institutionalizing the work by aligning the partnership with the organization's core mission and values (Open Textbooks, 2016).

Mitigating the potential usefulness of developing theories of partnerships in international education is the assumption that theories are expected to be generalizable—in the case of partnerships, this would suggest that there would be a certain level of cohesion across partnerships. However, as Brinkerhoff (2002) noted, no two partnerships are the same because the conditions and organizational cultures informing the partnerships usually vary greatly and/or are multifaceted. This is particularly true when taking into consideration how international partnerships in higher education are formed, that is, largely through different relational connections whether through faculty, alumni, or other related stakeholders. But despite the limits on the generalizability of partnership theories across HEIs, the value of thinking in terms of theory building may be regarding (1) considerations around the reproducibility of partnerships and systems strengthening within an institution, and (2) appreciating the circumstances from institution-to-institution in which partnerships are more or less successful (Brinkerhoff, 2002).

## OVERVIEW OF IPO PARTNERSHIPS

As mentioned throughout this volume, the guiding philosophy underpinning the work at UW is the WI Idea—the idea that education should influence people's lives beyond campus boundaries, benefitting every corner of the state and the world. IPO, a unit of the UW–Madison International Division, was created to bring this value to a global scale. When IPO was established in 2017, staff were charged to identify a model for developing international partnerships that would be mutually beneficial to partner institutions and long-term collaboration. The initial impetus for the office's establishment was from the internal experience that had been fostered through the UW–Madison Partnership with Nazarbayev University (NU).<sup>2</sup> More broadly, IPO develops and facilitates work that benefits

organizations worldwide while forging international ties to build and maintain robust foundations for cooperation and collaboration between UW–Madison and other organizations. What makes IPO’s partnerships different from others that are mentioned in this volume is the delimited focus on capacity building and systems strengthening in partner institutions/organizations, which excludes from the partnership apparatus activities like research collaboration.

Since its establishment, the IPO staff has been exploring multiple approaches—establishing strategic partners, identifying priority regions, and focusing on countries critical to operationalizing key institutional priorities as possibilities. They found that these approaches were currently being utilized by units throughout UW. The general criteria for the partnership agreements that IPO administers is that it should: (1) have an international focus; (2) focus on capacity building and systems strengthening; and (3) involve more than two UW campus units. If these basic criteria are met, then the IPO staff apply the theory of partnership and related technical instruments to determine if the theory’s basic conditions for partnership are met.<sup>3</sup> If those conditions are met, then a scope of work designed around the theories of change are cocreated by the partner institutions.

In the case of IPO’s theories of partnership and change then, utilizing the theories has enabled the office to both broaden and narrow its engagements with potential partners. There were partners that would not necessarily have been developed into an engagement without IPO’s broader criteria for potential partners. On the other hand, they have also helped IPO use a criteria-based decision-making process to determine if a potential partnership opportunity was unfeasible for UW in a more systematic and transparent way. Finally, IPO’s theory of theories of partnership and change is delimited to a certain type of international partnership, that is, one that is focused on capacity building and systems strengthening. This is because the dynamics and institutional mechanisms for how other partnerships and agreements, for example, focusing on faculty/student mobility or research collaborations, are administered and governed by different structures and so, they are outside the scope of these theories, along with the work that IPO does.

## IPO’S THEORIES OF PARTNERSHIP AND CHANGE

Rather than developing a partnership strategy, for example, a strategic partners approach or institutional expansion plan,<sup>4</sup> IPO developed a *theory of partnership* to guide conversations with potential partners and respond to emerging opportunities in culturally relevant and flexible ways as well as being complementary to the longstanding work being operationalized

by other campus units. The IPO staff also developed theories of change to clarify to demonstrate linkages between institutional change and the work that UW provides.

### **IPO's Theory of Partnership**

This theory was built on learnings from existing partnerships and is underlying informed by UW–Madison's organizational values, mission, and institutional culture. Specifically, the UW IPO theory of partnership posits that:

- **If** the proposed partner institution/organization is committed to building local capacity;
- **If** both institutions share a commitment to follow the process through to “maturity”;
- **If** institutional commitment exists to support capacity building to maturity for both the partner institution and UW; **then**
- The partnership investment will transform the partner institution into one that is autonomous, sustainable, and robustly equipped with the capacity to carry out its core mission, while affording UW opportunities to further internationalize the university in line with its mission and values.

For example, if a potential partner proposes to focus on capacity building, IPO works with partner interlocutors and UW–Madison colleagues to determine: (1) the work's broader aim; (2) the intended long(er) term outcome (development phase); and (3) UW campus capacity and priorities.

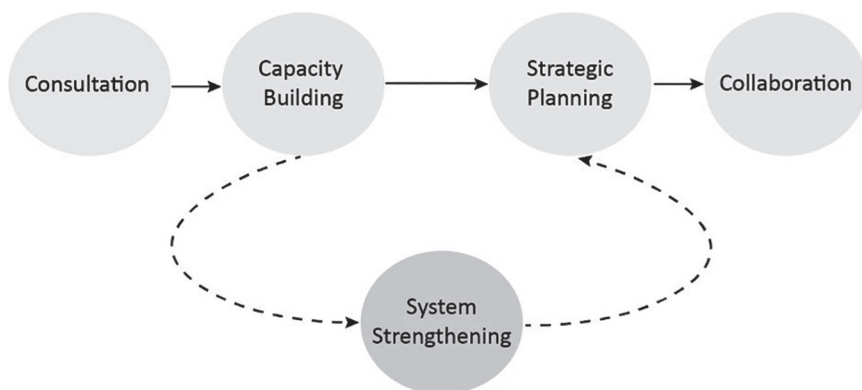
Having an articulated theory of partnership has enabled IPO staff to start with the long-term objective of establishing sustainable and strategic long-term partnership goals and then work backwards toward the immediate needs and work. Moreover, articulating the values informing this framework in the exploratory phase of a potential partnership facilitates an inclusive and transparent dialogue between partner organizations, which then may foster a mutual vested interest. This creates a partnership that does not see UW–Madison trying to impose an image of itself upon the other organization or treating the relationship as transactional. Rather, the outcome is a shared sense of responsibility and respect. This theory was informed by understanding UW's organizational culture, identifying what was most successful about past and present partnerships from stakeholder perspectives, and then distilling those observations into 3 conditional criteria.

The first conditional criterion is that institutional representatives should have a shared commitment to the missions and goals of each institution, both philosophically and pragmatically. A vested interest in the success of each partner leads to greater collaboration. Second, partners should have a vision for long-term collaboration. This vision allows partners to IPO's consider the benefits of collaboration beyond initial goals, thereby providing opportunities for each partner. The third criterion for IPO's theory of partnerships is a commitment to capacity building, which is more explicitly linked to the Wisconsin Idea and the values it espouses. In this way, identifying partners committed to capacity building helps fulfill one of UW's foundational philosophies by providing connections to extensive expertise at the university. Likewise, as UW faculty, staff and students engage in this capacity building work, there is a "learning through doing" which often takes place and facilitates deeper learning and internationalization at UW as well.

### IPO's Theory of Change

While IPO's theory of partnership explains the institutional conditions that guided the broader engagement, IPO's theory of change aims to transparently demonstrate how activities are contributing to the partner institution's development from consultation and capacity building toward increasing collaboration but allowing success to be determined by relevant metrics in the partner's context. This theory of change is divided into different phases—*consulting*, *capacity building*, *systems strengthening*, *strategic planning* and *collaboration* (see Figure 39.1). Figure 39.1 outlines the path IPO staff utilize with potential partners when they are brainstorming about the potential partnership institution's needs and to clarify how that activity or work may contribute to a desired potential outcome.

To briefly illustrate this in action, in 2012, NU senior administrators became interested in establishing an academic advising services unit to help students navigate programs of study. UW advising staff conducted a needs assessment and provided recommendations on establishing an academic advising unit for NU's consideration (*consultation*). UW-NU interlocutors considered how to develop a foundation for a sustainable program in the NU context. The NU unit was then established in the School of Humanities and Social Sciences. From 2014 to 2018, UW staff continued to facilitate training for NU advisors and administrators focused on developing programs and skills (*capacity building*). In 2018, the NU advising unit was expanded to serve the entire undergraduate student body. At that point, UW began providing support for the unit's leadership around strategic planning, hiring and management (*strategic planning*).

**Figure 39.1***Project Development Theory of Change*

While IPO's theory of partnership explains the institutional conditions that guided the broader engagement, IPO's theory of change aims to transparently demonstrate how activities are contributing to the partner institution's development from consultation and capacity building toward increasing collaboration but allowing success to be determined by relevant metrics in the partner's context. In a different partnership with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Crisis Bureau's Rapid Solutions and Human Mobility team, which focused on COVID-19 crisis response, UW's work focused on providing capacity building support for UNDP country offices (COs) to respond to the complexities of coordinating crisis response during the COVID-19 pandemic (Ahn et al., this volume). In addition to regular calls and responding to emerging queries, the UW team developed a workbook tool to help various UNDP country offices think through the components of crisis response in a systematic way. The metric to evaluate this output was *effectiveness*—did the workbook enable UNDP COs to locally respond to the COVID-19 pandemic? Subsequently, in the feedback survey UW conducted, UNDP respondents reported high levels of satisfaction and value for the tool because it integrated the questions and challenges which they had shared with UW and others during the six-month engagement.

By employing this theory of change, UW and principals at partner institutions have opportunities to engage in longer-term thinking and articulating specific growth areas. This type of mutual engagement may help both partners to think about the quotidian aspects of capacity building in areas like university operations and how to leverage those areas to engage in deep(er) internationalization (Frydinger et al., 2019). This process has frequently helped participants in both institutions develop much



clearer or systemic understanding of the relationships connecting local tasks or policies to the institution's broader mission. By engaging relevant stakeholders from the beginning from both institutions and collaboratively thinking through areas for capacity building and growth, this facilitates activities that are inclusive, participatory, and focus on reinforcing activities that have acknowledged value by all contributors (Merkz, 2015).

Concretely, since 2017, IPO has facilitated and developed 13 partnerships and projects with institutions and organizations both within the US and around the world. These partnerships have contributed to institutional change both at UW and the partner institution and their outcomes demonstrate a key goal of internationalization within higher education—the sharing of ideas and experiences to create meaningful epistemic change.

## DISCUSSION

Utilizing a theory-driven or informed approach to international partnership engagement may help institutions articulate what they consider as being critical contextual and environmental factors that indicate institutional commitment to a partnership. Having the framework that a theory creates may also help establish expectations at the onset by delineating what work will characterize the partnership and agreeing on a shared understanding of the longer-term desired outcomes. Put another way, theories can help inform what trade-offs partner institutions are willing to make during negotiations and discussions but establish a vision of why those trade-offs are justifiable (Brinkerhoff, 2002).

In the bigger picture, returning to Brown's (1976) notion of theory as metaphor, the value of having a theory may be in understanding that it should be a "model *for* something rather than *of* something, because the model is intended to serve some conceptual purpose, not to be an imitation of a thing's appearance" (p. 183). By developing a descriptive understanding of what the partnership consists of but what the invisible apparatus around it is provides insight or at the very least an appreciation of what may, in fact, be generalizable from partnership to partnership. This then, in the IPO case, has resulted in new partnership practices (Sandelands, 1990).

From an operational standpoint, utilizing a partnership theory within international education also provides insight into potential gaps. For example, in developing the theory of partnership, it became clear that to operationalize the theory, IPO staff needed to develop an instrument that would more concretely determine if a potential partner institution was, for example, committed to building local capacity. This is a contextual condition that needed criteria that could serve as its proxy. Subsequently,

IPO staff then developed an instrument corresponding to this theory of partnership to make preliminary judgements regarding the viability of potential partnership opportunities.

## CONCLUSION

Both the establishment of IPO and the theories of partnership and change represent two interconnected innovations for UW–Madison in the international engagement space. As a unit, IPO has introduced a new component of internationalization at the institution-level. IPO’s theory of partnership prioritizes beginning with organizational values to cocreate work and then guides the subsequent engagement. This creates transformational impacts in work with partner organizations and benefits for UW aligned with university values and broader strategic goals for internationalization and partnership engagement.

Returning to Sutton’s (2010) observation that there was a need to rethinking partnership, that is, moving from the transactional to transformational, universities may consider having international partnership offices that are “proactive about establishing and reinforcing a values basis for partnership work and a corresponding partnership identity” (Brinkerhoff, 2002, p. 177). The COVID-19 pandemic has brought this need for transformational partnerships and global networks into even sharper relief, which means that HEIs need to consider how to creatively foster and further develop these types of linkages to continue responding to the global challenges of today in robust partnership with institutions around the world.

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## ENDNOTES

1. This chapter does not provide in-depth case studies of specific partnerships. For more detailed overviews see Martin and McDonald (this volume) about the UW–Madison Partnership with NU and Ahn et al. (this volume) about UW's partnership with the United Nations Development Programme.
2. See Martin and McDonald (this volume).
3. NB: This chapter provides an overview of the theories of partnership and change that the IPO staff have developed and does not discuss the technical instruments that operationalize the theories.
4. For examples, see <https://global.arizona.edu/micro-campus>, <https://www.insidehighered.com/blogs/globalhighered/deep-internationalization-infrastructure>, or <https://globalcenters.columbia.edu/> for more information.