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Review article

A decade of international collaboration between Illinois College and the University of Pinar del Río

Un decenio de colaboración internacional entre Illinois College y la Universidad de Pinar del Río

Uma década de colaboração internacional entre o Illinois College e a Universidade de Pinar del Río

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ABSTRACT

Cooperation as a joint work action between university institutions, from the local, regional and global levels, is oriented towards objectives that demonstrate the capacity to work in favor of institutional and academic strengthening and social transformation on the basis of efficiency, respect, solidarity, shared commitment and responsibility. This proposal presents the actions for the establishment and execution of relations between U.S. and Cuban universities and the main results obtained during 10 years of uninterrupted cooperation, with centralized coordination and organization in pairs for research as the main working procedures. The origin of cooperation, its evolution and results are described; specific and characteristic elements regulated in a procedure are identified. International cooperation is increasingly essential for the development of universities, as it contributes to raising the quality of education and supports institutions in meeting the demands of society in an increasingly interconnected world. The experience of managing and implementing the program of cooperation between the institutions highlighted in this article has led to innovative strategies, which can be effectively applied to other international collaborations.

Keywords: international cooperation; higher education; research peers; centralized coordination.

RESUMEN

La cooperación como acción conjunta de trabajo, entre instituciones universitarias, desde lo local, lo regional y lo global, se orienta hacia objetivos que demuestran capacidad de trabajo a favor del fortalecimiento institucional y académico y la transformación social sobre la base de la eficiencia, el respeto, la solidaridad, el compromiso y responsabilidad compartidos. En la presente propuesta se expone el accionar para el establecimiento, la ejecución de relaciones entre universidades estadounidenses y cubanas y los principales resultados obtenidos a lo largo de 10 años de ininterrumpida cooperación, al ser la coordinación centralizada y la organización en pares para la investigación los procedimientos principales de trabajo. Se describe el origen de la cooperación, su evolución y resultados; se identifican elementos específicos y característicos regulados en un procedimiento. La cooperación internacional es cada vez más esencial para el desarrollo de las universidades, pues contribuye a elevar la calidad de la educación y apoya a las instituciones para satisfacer las demandas que la sociedad precisa, en un mundo cada vez más interconectado. La experiencia de administrar y ejecutar el programa de cooperación entre las instituciones destacadas en este artículo ha dado lugar a estrategias innovadoras, que pueden aplicarse eficazmente a otras colaboraciones internacionales.

Palabras clave: cooperación internacional; enseñanza superior; pares de investigación; coordinación centralizada.

RESUMO

A cooperação como ação de trabalho conjunto entre instituições universitárias, desde o nível local, regional e global, está orientada a objetivos que demonstram a capacidade de trabalhar em prol do fortalecimento institucional e acadêmico e da transformação social com base na eficiência, no respeito, na solidariedade, no compromisso compartilhado e na

responsabilidade. Esta proposta descreve as ações tomadas para estabelecer e implementar as relações entre as universidades norte-americanas e cubanas e os principais resultados obtidos ao longo de 10 anos de cooperação ininterrupta, sendo a coordenação centralizada e a organização em pares para pesquisa os principais procedimentos de trabalho. A origem da cooperação, sua evolução e seus resultados são descritos; elementos específicos e característicos regulados em um procedimento são identificados. A cooperação internacional é cada vez mais essencial para o desenvolvimento das universidades, pois contribui para elevar a qualidade da educação e apoia as instituições no atendimento às demandas da sociedade em um mundo cada vez mais interconectado. A experiência de gerenciar e implementar o programa de cooperação entre as instituições destacadas neste artigo levou a estratégias inovadoras, que podem ser aplicadas com eficácia a outras colaborações internacionais.

Palavras-chave: cooperação internacional; ensino superior; parceiros de pesquisa; coordenação centralizada.

INTRODUCTION

The international collaboration analyzed in this article has taken place between the Universidad de Pinar del Río "Hermanos Saíz Montes de Oca", a public institution attached to the Ministry of Higher Education (MES) of Cuba, which since 2013 has developed exchange and cooperation actions with Illinois College (IC), a university institution in the United States of America; all through the application of procedures for the management of cooperation that have allowed progress in the consolidation of a relationship that, in an innovative way, has achieved the growing incorporation of professors, students, disciplines, programs, and a fourth Cuban institution, to the project they have conceived.

Recently, other Cuban universities have joined the collaborative effort, such as the Artemisa University "Julio Díaz González" (UA) and the University of Medical Sciences "Ernesto Guevara de la Serna" (UCMPR), in Cuba, with significant results that have expanded the collaboration.

The strategic goals and objectives of the initial institutions are the basis for the creation of successful international collaborations between universities, by ensuring that collaborations between different areas strengthen the participating institutions, by improving the quality of the programs and by developing a culture for the management of internationalization and research.

This vision of the creation of international partnerships between institutions corresponds to that presented by Sebastián (2004), who states that international cooperation between universities is based on the complementarity of their capacities to carry out combined activities and on mutual collaboration. This generates synergies and additional values, thus improving the quality of cooperation.

Before the restoration of diplomatic relations between the United States and Cuba in 2015, during the administration of Barack Obama, collaborations between American and Cuban institutions were limited to a small number of individual exchanges, based on agreements made, for the most part, with the University of Havana. However, the thawing of relations between the United States and Cuba was a milestone for both nations and their universities. It provided the opportunity to develop broader inter-university collaborations in the field of Higher Education. With the change in Cuban-American relations, the number of exchanges and inter-institutional agreements multiplied, demonstrating that these relations serve as important tools for the reunion between both peoples. Despite the progress achieved with the exchanges of students and professors between American and Cuban institutions, conflicts in the political relationship between the United States and Cuba are interpreted as barriers to the

development of cooperation. Under the Donald Trump administration, tensions worsened significantly. With the elimination of consular services at the US Embassy in Havana and the imposition of new economic sanctions on Cuba, Cuban institutions have been limited in what they can do, especially in the area of teacher and student mobility. The current period, under the presidency of Joseph Biden in the United States, offered hope and at one point it was seen that the relationship between the two countries would improve.

The initial cooperative efforts between the institutions began in 2013 with a small number of exchanges with research interests. The success of the research project results provided a pathway for expanding and sustaining institutional cooperation. As more disciplines were incorporated into the cooperation, it expanded to include other institutions in that region of Cuba. Maintaining these relationships and developing new ones required aligning intra- and inter-institutional interests with strategic objectives, maintaining communication, and motivating the participation of a growing number of students, professors, and administrators, based on continuous monitoring, in order to achieve better quality indices.

The goal of this process has been to create reciprocal international collaborations between Higher Education institutions that are effective and impactful, while adhering to the institutional vision/mission. In these, faculty work together on research and programs in which students from both institutions interact with each other, learning together.

Efforts to identify and optimize opportunities for collaboration are in line with the guidelines of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), which advocates the internationalization of universities through "the complete internationalization of the higher education system to improve quality and meet the challenges posed by globalization" (Botero & Bolívar, 2015, p. 15). Achieving such objectives requires that managers, professors and

internationalization experts work in favor of innovation, development and improvement of interuniversity cooperation practices.

In order to successfully advance cooperation between the participating universities, the process was "...comprehensive and involved integrating the international, intercultural and global dimensions into all institutional policies and programs, so that international activities become a priority in the development of the institution" (Gacel, A., 2009, p. 8). All the institutions involved agree that "internationalization is an extension of the term international education and a strategic process whose objective is the integration of the international and intercultural dimension..." (de Wit, translated by Gacel, 2009, p. 6).

Gatewood (2020) argues that international collaborations are key to fostering global engagement, allowing institutions to internationalize their curricula and research activities. When properly implemented, they strengthen programs, boost research, and enhance global engagement, enriching links abroad.

First world institutions must understand these concerns and develop their collaborations accordingly, so that the relationship is reciprocal.

International collaboration is key to improving the efficiency of Higher Education institutions in promoting the right to quality education and fostering sustainable societies, integrating this cooperation into their programs and structures (UNESCO, 2022).

Rodríguez *et al.* (2021, p. 219) focused their study on transformative, teacher-centered professional development projects: "We found that teachers appreciated the freedom to work on their transformative projects in small groups of their choosing or individually, while receiving support from the broader learning community."

Taking the above into consideration, it was crucial to establish research connections with the

teaching staff and to create a broader network of relationships between different institutions, supported by the management. The universities implemented the following procedure: initiate a productive teaching collaboration, develop a network of collaborations grouping researchers with similar interests and appoint a research professor from each institution to coordinate the actions and facilitate the participation of students and professors.

On the other hand, Gatewood (2020) argues that an international partnership implies that at least two organizations from different contexts and cultures collaborate to achieve common goals. Although it seems simple, managing these relationships requires careful planning and meticulous attention.

Acknowledging this risk, work was done from the beginning on an agreement that was not just about intentions, but focused on implementation that would serve to support the objectives of the institutions involved in the collaboration, with an emphasis on managing internationalization.

Regarding the importance of developing a collaboration that includes multiple areas, Hoseth & Thampapillai, in Gatewood (2020) conclude that the expansion and diversification of current assistance can offer significant advantages for an institution, since multidisciplinary collaborations are usually more sustainable than unidimensional ones.

Finally, the cooperation between the two initial institutions and those that joined later were evaluated using criteria of effective interuniversity cooperation, which correspond to those proposed by Sebastián (2017).

In this article, the systematization of concepts, principles and theories allowed to establish the frame of reference to develop university cooperation and to establish a theoretical-practical procedure, as a guiding thread for the results presented. In line with the above, the use of historical-logical analysis allowed to understand the behavior of the stages and the

essential aspects that caused changes during the development of cooperation (Torres-Miranda, 2020). The document analysis carried out guided the review of various contributions to provide scientific support and strengthen the arguments addressed in relation to the background and development of cooperation (APA, 2022; cited by Martínez *et al.*, 2023). At the same time, it contributed to decision-making and changes in actions and strategies during collaboration (Dulzaides & Molina, 2024). In addition, an interview was conducted with the teaching researchers and directors involved.

DEVELOPMENT

Characterization of the participating universities that initiated the collaboration

A small, liberal arts college in the Midwest, IC's mission is to help students develop the qualities of mind and character necessary for a life of leadership, personal achievement, and service. With an enrollment of approximately 1,000 students, it offers 50-degree programs in business, humanities, arts, social and natural sciences, education, and nursing. It provides undergraduates with the opportunity to conduct research in their field of study as part of academic experiences abroad.

The University of Pinar del Río, a regional public university located in the westernmost part of Cuba, has a student body of about 7,000 undergraduate and graduate students and offers 84 programs covering undergraduate and advanced technical courses in the areas of economic and accounting sciences, technical, social, pedagogical, forestry and agricultural sciences, and physical culture and sports; as well as master's degrees, specialties and doctorates. Its structure includes three urban campuses and ten municipal university centers.

The UA is a public university located in Artemisa, Cuba. It was founded on November 13, 2021, and arose from a MES unification project. It has

about 6,000 undergraduate and graduate students and offers 49 programs covering higher education and technical courses in education, social sciences, pedagogy, agriculture, technology, business, physical culture and sports; as well as postgraduate courses and master's degrees. It has three urban campuses and eleven municipal university centers and is linked to the Soroa Orchid Botanical Garden (JBOS).

UCMPR is a public university founded in 1968. Its mission is to train health professionals in Medicine, Dentistry, Psychology, Nursing and Health Technology, in four faculties. In addition, it provides continuing postgraduate education in subjects such as: medical education, continuing medical education, premedical education, professional education and hospital education services, and various specialties such as: Pediatrics, Dermatology and Comprehensive General Medicine.

Origins and evolution of cooperation relations

The case study conducted by LeBeau & Zhang (2022, p. 140) states that: "...serves as proof that the ultimate goal of internationalization is a service to society, not an economic benefit."

As part of a comprehensive strategy, the IC has sought to internationalize its curriculum, allowing students to undertake stays abroad. This broadens their perspectives and integrates them into a global community, preparing them to face the challenges of the 21st century. In this context, opportunities have arisen in Cuba to develop academic programs and research collaborations.

The IC universities and the University of Pinar del Río have collaborated to strengthen university internationalization, increasing the participation of professors and students in research projects and academic programs that benefit the local community. The aforementioned management is also based on what is proposed in the third edition of the International Higher Education

Manual, which, in general terms, has been outlined in its second edition and lists the basic functions of internationalization and its relationship with the substantive functions, what is related to intercultural competence, as well as the commitment of students and professors in its management (Deardorff *et al.*, 2022).

Higher education institutions should train educators in cultural competence and foster this skill in students, since experiences abroad increase intercultural sensitivity and global awareness (Anderson *et al.*, 2006; Douglas & Jones, 2001, cited by Gopal *et al.*, 2024).

Emphasis is placed on the consideration of intercultural competence as a key aspect in the relationships established in cooperation, which is presented in favor of solid institutional and interpersonal relationships, where the use of the immersion method and communication is also an essential aspect for achieving success.

In this sense, Deardorff (2022) considers that it is necessary to be aware of one's own and others' standards in communication. For this author, adaptation to verbal and non-verbal communication styles is essential in favor of effective communication; he emphasizes the need to listen in order to better understand and, thus, better adapt to the standards of others.

Based on these assumptions, it is necessary to describe the origins that support the present cooperation and what happened, precisely, during a university internationalization action within the framework of the Andean Orchid Congress, held in Guayaquil, Ecuador, in November 2012, through the meeting of Dr. Ernesto Mujica, Cuban expert in studies of the ghost orchid (*Dendrophyllax lindenii*) and a JBOS researcher, then subordinate to the University of Pinar del Río, currently linked to the UA, and Dr. Lawrence Zettler, an expert from Illinois College on Florida ghost orchid issues. This meeting has been called the "seed" that gave fruit to the cooperation described. This opportunity allowed for the definition of future actions in order to carry out the first IC visit in August 2013; from

then on, efforts were encouraged to locate other opportunities for inter-institutional cooperation.

In January 2014, a delegation of IC professors and students traveled to Cuba. Meetings were arranged at JBOS and at the University of Pinar del Río, and the foundations were laid to convert the research relationship into an institutional relationship that would provide opportunities for other Cuban and American researchers to work together. Subsequently, in 2014 and 2015, researchers from each institution met to form the pairs. The program was organized from the centralized coordination by each institution and the socialization of interests among the interested researchers, and later, the incorporation of student researchers from Illinois College (IC). This experience made it possible to visualize the advantages derived from the linking of teaching, both undergraduate and graduate, to the action of research cooperation; its feasibility constituted another element in favor of the formalization of the cooperation.

It was of interest to IC the Cuba's history, its diverse population, its rich cultural production, its important ecosystems, its focus on organic agriculture and on health and education. Likewise, the conception of the research programs that allowed collaboration, as well as the academic programs offered at the University of Pinar del Río, which complemented IC's academic programs by benefiting from the learning of a different socioeconomic system, which has gone through several stages of development in the last 60 years and has provided innovative and sustainable solutions to complex problems.

Likewise, the participating Cuban universities have found, in the association with IC, an opportunity to promote internationalization management and to enter the panorama of Higher Education in the United States, by offering new possibilities for the development of training and research activities, as well as for cultural exchange, which constitutes a gateway to expanding collaboration with other American institutions.

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Initial exchanges led to a strategic focus on collaboration in a variety of areas. The aim was to carry out joint research on orchids, language teaching, pedagogy and anthropology, to enrich the curriculum. In addition, connections would be established between undergraduate and graduate students and annual workshops and conferences would be organized. The results were also intended to be disseminated internationally in publications and conferences. Finally, cultural and linguistic immersion programs would be developed in collaboration with local institutions.

Following this process of exploration, negotiation and mutual recognition, a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) was signed in 2016, in a central act chaired by the rectors of both universities. Although it was not initially included in this agreement, the UA joined the process by signing a MOU at a later date. This action confirmed the mutual commitment and established clear and balanced deadlines and resources; more than an intention, it would be an implementation (Siegler, 2017).

From the outset, it was recognized that the success of the relationship depended on the coordinators' ability to inspire, innovate, and communicate with teachers and administrators in order to design a comprehensive program. To this end, lists of interested teachers were developed and information was collected to foster collaboration.

A relevant factor was to incorporate students into research and/or build an academic program around research. Bringing together all researchers and students in workshops and lecture series created a sense of community, strengthened ties between institutions, and encouraged research progress and the adjustment of future activity plans by coordinators.

Having a single coordinator at each institution as a procedure was crucial for planning discussions and coordinating all collaborative efforts, as well as ensuring effective communication. At the

same time, efforts to involve multiple faculty members through the disparate collaborative projects generated by the creation of research peers were instrumental in attracting more participants, since if a researcher loses interest or leaves the institution, the program will continue.

Table 1 provides a sample of the results obtained by the peers for the research.

Table 1- Main results obtained from the research pairs

Peers	Research	Results
Professors and botanists, IC and University of Pinar del Río.	Conservation of the Ghost Orchid (<i>Dendrophylaxlindenii</i>)	Four peer-reviewed articles. Four general presentations/conference summaries. One book chapter, five conference presentations.
Spanish teacher, IC Professor of Anthropology, University of Pinar del Río.	Methodology for teaching the identification of rhetorical figures as a metaphor in the texts of Fernando Ortiz.	Two articles, five conference presentations.
English and Spanish Teachers Writing Center, IC. English Teacher and Language Center, University of Pinar del Río	Perfecting, designing and applying methodologies for students, University of Pinar del Río (reaching a B1 writing level).	Creation of a program. Developing language materials for students, IC. One conference presentation. One publication in conference proceedings, two talks given locally.
Professor of Sociology, IC. Professor of Physical Education, University of Pinar del Río.	Historical and cultural differences and ideologies that influence how physical activity is viewed and practiced	Creation of materials for students studying athletic training and physical education, IC. One conference presentation. Two presentations in the town.
Professor of Music, IC. Archivist, Music Center in Pinar del Río.	Document the musical traditions of a particular region of Cuba.	Materials used in talks and classes. One conference presentation. Two presentations in the town.
Theatre directors in	Collaboration between theater directors from	Materials for a theatrical performance workshop.

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Pinar del Río. Illinois professor and theatre director.	the United States and Cuba	One conference presentation. One presentation in the town.
Religion teacher. IC theatre teacher.	Sabbatical project for IC teachers at the University of Pinar del Río.	Symposia, presentations and debates with students and professors at the UPR. One conference presentation. Two presentations in the town.
IC Coordinators and University of Pinar del Río.	Development of a plan to maximize participation in the cooperative relationship.	Increase in the number of participants, six presentations on the internationalization of the campus through the cooperative relationship between both universities.

From simple disciplinary collaboration to complex university cooperation

The following timeline lists the main activities that highlight the continuity of the first steps and the evolution of the cooperative relationship after the signing of the MOU in January 2016:

1. May 2016: Visit of a delegation from Illinois College to the University of Pinar del Río. Areas: biology, ecology, agriculture, education, anthropology, languages and theatre.
2. July 2016: JBOS researchers visit wildlife refuge (USA)
3. January 2017: IC delegation visits the University of Pinar del Río. Meeting at JBOS to assess progress of collaborations and discuss plans for future actions. Incorporation of UCMPR as a participant in the collaboration. Meeting at UCMPR to plan exchanges between professors and students of medical sciences and nursing programs in the USA.
4. March 2017: Visit of an Anthropology professor from the University of Pinar del Río to Illinois College. Lecture on women and the new Cuban economy.
5. May 2018: development of internships with IC students at the University of Pinar del Río and UCMPR.
6. October-November 2018: Exhibition of photos taken by IC students and the University of Pinar del Río on the IC campus, open to the local community. A book of photographs of both contexts was designed.
7. November 2018: Meeting of IC coordinators, the University of Pinar del Río and JBOS in Cuba to plan a research workshop in May 2019.
8. March 2019: IC-JBOS meeting. Genetics laboratory set up to support research on the ghost orchid.
9. May 2019: Development of internships with IC students at the University of Pinar del Río and UCMPR. Planning to teach the laboratory part of the Tropical Ecology course at JBOS. Meeting of Cuban-American research peers at the University of Pinar del Río. Signing of the ME with the UA.
10. February 2020: participation of IC, UA and the University of Pinar del Río in the XI International Workshop on "Internationalization of Higher Education", 13th International Congress on Higher Education, University 2020, Havana, Cuba.
11. February-March 2020: sabbatical project at the University of Pinar del Río by two IC professors.
12. February-April 2020: Internship of two IC students at UCMPR.
13. March 2020: Completion of laboratory classes for the Cuban Biodiversity course at JBOS for IC students.
14. June 2020: signing of ME between IC and UCMPR.
15. March 2023: preparation of internship programs for IC and Lander University (LU) students.
16. May-June 2023: visit to the University of Pinar del Río by IC and a professor from LU.
17. February 2024: participation of IC, UA, University of Pinar del Río and UCMPR in the XII International Workshop on "Internationalization of Higher Education", 14th International Congress

on Higher Education, University 2024, in Havana, Cuba.

Collaborative activities often have significant costs, especially at the start, so it is crucial to have the support of governments and establish strong relationships to prioritize funding.

It is important to highlight the support of the university administrations in this cooperation, as they have transformed the project into an institutional effort, without which the success of the collaboration would not have been possible.

Established procedures for cooperation

In her studio, Sehoole, Chika *et al.* (2023, p. 33), call for "...adopting the African philosophy of Ubuntu to create awareness among partners for institutional leaders..." and use "...ACE principles to offer a new way of addressing current challenges in collaborations between the Global North and the Global South":

A. Be more aware of how to visualize the way we operate and identify the prior assumptions that are brought to these collaborations.

C. Review how we connect with partners in a global north-global south context, with a view to establishing meaningful and equitable connections.

E. It is essential to create practical strategies and empower collaborators to foster balanced collaboration aligned with the Ubuntu philosophy.

They advocate for "... embracing a more collaborative and empowered future by using the three principles of Consciousness, Connection and Empowerment" and underline "...the essence of trust, cognitive justice, transformation through expansion, strong relationships, empowerment and continuous learning, among others, as ways to strengthen North-South knowledge relations" (2023, p. 41).

The collaboration presented in this article is based on the experience of institutions in interuniversity cooperation, which have maintained exchanges with universities from various nations. In addition, it is based on theories that highlight the importance of international cooperation in scientific research. Success depends on the motivation of academics and researchers to work with colleagues from other countries, driven by common interests and the desire to share and publish results, backed by an institutional commitment to cooperation.

According to Gatewood (2020), comprehensive international collaboration allows participating institutions to develop strong institutional connections on a global scale; in addition, he considers that to improve collaboration, institutions need to self-evaluate and identify their needs and capacities, as well as the opportunities to collaborate with other institutions by establishing nodes and combining strengths that lead to the discovery of new links.

Undoubtedly, the above ideas contributed to the design of an inclusive, intentional, committed, growing and sustainable cooperation program over time.

Principles supporting university cooperation

The university cooperation described is based on the following principles:

Principle of sustainability in university cooperation

Commitment to sustainable development is key for Higher Education institutions, beyond the 2030 Agenda, integrating into academic, research and extension programs, and promoting international cooperation, aligned with the SDGs (sustainable development goals), promoting north-south synergies (Galán-Muros & Francesc, 2022).

Sustainability in today's university is a key pillar for research. It must be integrated into all

processes and considered in policies in a coherent manner, requiring the collaboration of different actors to promote social, economic and environmental development (Cachinell *et al.*, 2022).

This principle is based on developing sustainable initiatives that generate a positive long-term impact, benefiting the institutions and communities involved, by considering their needs and promoting synergies and innovations in which:

1. A balanced exchange of knowledge and resources between institutions is sought to avoid disadvantages.
2. Transparency is promoted with monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to ensure compliance with objectives and the dissemination of results.
3. A commitment to sustainable development is maintained in the environmental, social and economic fields.
4. Continuous evolution and adaptation to contemporary changes are encouraged, integrating new ideas to enhance impact.

Principle of strengthening connections in university cooperation

The development of inter-institutional links, formalized through cooperation agreements for academic and scientific exchange, offers an innovative perspective on organizational learning and knowledge management between universities with different training profiles (Abreu *et al.*, 2019).

This principle focuses on establishing strong and lasting relationships between participating institutions, with the aim of producing a positive long-term impact through mutual collaboration to:

1. Building trust and engagement through respectful communication.

2. Establish collaborative goals and action plans that reflect the institutional commitment to cooperation.
3. Integrate cooperation into university development plans.
4. Create networks between researchers, students and communities for exchange.
5. Link university cooperation with social innovation and technology transfer projects.
6. Share results and lessons learned from cooperation with the university community and society to expand its impact.

The principle of solidarity in university cooperation

Solidarity is a fundamental ethical value and a universal principle in the comprehensive development of individuals. It reflects civic conduct in the family, education, community and work, both nationally and internationally, "...as an international practice, which is shown in individual wills, but also in institutional political wills" (Campos, 2023, p. 15).

This article addresses solidarity as a key principle that drives active and altruistic collaboration, with the support of institutional leaders, to address common challenges and promote collective well-being.

The principle of inclusion in university cooperation

The principle implies that all universities, regardless of their size, location, resources or characteristics, have the opportunity to participate in collaborative initiatives and benefit from their results. The creation of an inclusive space fosters an environment where all participating universities feel welcome, respected and valued, regardless of their origin or characteristics. It is based on:

1. Diversity as a fundamental value that reflects academic and social plurality.

2. Eliminate obstacles such as lack of resources, geographical isolation, discrimination and lack of opportunities.
3. Promote equity and justice by ensuring that all universities have equal opportunities for collaboration, regardless of their history or resources.

The principle of complementarity in university cooperation

Exchanging ideas with the university community can lead to innovative proposals. Incorporating the opinions of local and international students provides valuable perspectives that can lead to new educational programs, expand research, and increase student engagement (Hoseth & Thampapillai, in Gatewood, 2020).

This principle is based on the idea that participating universities, with their unique strengths and weaknesses, can work together to achieve common goals that none of them could achieve alone, and is based on:

1. The diversity of skills from different specialties that enriches joint work and generates synergies.
2. The complementarity of resources that allows access to infrastructure, equipment, experience and networks that are not available individually.
3. Integrating diverse perspectives fosters innovative solutions to common challenges.
4. Strengthen specific capabilities by optimizing training.
5. Generate added value by producing an impact greater than the sum of its parts.

Within this framework, fundamental importance is given to research. For this reason, the structure of the process is based on the internationalization of Research, Development and Innovation (R&D&I), considering it as the central axis of international collaborations, which generates a multiplier effect that continually expands the available opportunities. As a requirement, the institutions involved must have

an internationalization strategy that is implemented through specific actions. According to Sebastián (2000, p. 170): "The culture of cooperation in R&D&I incorporates the international dimension and constitutes, in practice, a driver of internationalization and is a strategic variable."

According to Alcaraz (2007, p. 9), the objective of research is "...to advance knowledge, that is, to better understand reality, on the one hand, and to discover its unexplored paths, on the other..." By internationalizing research, the R&D&I aspect of international cooperation becomes an integral part of the programs for developing intercultural competences for students, teachers and administrators. This can contribute to strengthening the quality of university and postgraduate teaching.

Equally important is that the benefits of university internationalization extend to the relationship between the university and society. Teaching and research are brought into the community, allowing culture, learning and discovery to travel in both directions (Gómez and Fernández-Larrea, 2012), as professors, students and community members participate in exchanges, publications, visits and exhibitions.

Evaluation as a good practice: criteria adopted, evaluation results, lessons learned

While establishing partnerships to initiate research and fostering their development and innovation, it is important to continually evaluate the collaboration, in order to identify and foster strengths and to warn and remedy problems that arise, in order to ensure the continuity of collaborative efforts. FAO (2013) provided the criteria for evaluating best practices. Sebastián (2017) explained how to evaluate the effectiveness of the cooperative relationship, and MIDE-UC (2009), cited by Tocornal (2011) provided the key dimensions and indicators for success. The process was evaluated based on the following criteria:

1. Effective and successful: its relevance is demonstrated by achieving the established objective, generating a positive impact on the collaborating institutions and their community.
2. Innovative: the methods and strategies implemented are innovative, increasing the motivation of academics, students and managers. Internationalization is key to cooperation, encouraging the creation of research groups and effective coordination.
3. Sustainable: generates replicable and lasting changes, allowing the expansion of simple to more complex collaborations.
4. Inclusive/participatory: the participation of various institutional actors is encouraged, integrating local community activities and creating research groups based on effective communication.
5. Management: focuses on quality and its connection with the institutional management system, covering risk management, clear objectives, transparency and resource management.

As part of the evaluation process, each institution assesses the results and proposes actions for improvement. The evaluation must be carried out periodically (annually or at the end of each program/semester) and is based on the assessment of criteria such as the following:

- The total number of activities classified by type during the period evaluated.
- The number of teachers and students participating in the collaboration.
- The number of areas of knowledge that are part of the collaboration.
- Number of projects, lines and research topics involved.
- Number of interactions/contacts between teachers and students.
- Number of presentations and publications made.
- Level of achievement of expectations by participants.
- Level of implementation of the activities planned in the program.

The collaboration between the above-mentioned institutions highlights the achievements of researchers and coordinators, evidencing a positive impact on the academic program and benefiting undergraduate and graduate students in their academic and intercultural development. New areas for collaborative research have also been identified. In addition to these results, the evaluation of the collaboration suggests that the internationalization objectives can be achieved through:

- The organization of at least one annual action that brings together students and teachers.
- The design of semester and annual programs for Illinois College (IC) students in Cuba.
- The establishment of a four-week summer program for IC students in western Cuba.
- Work to include more students from Cuba in research and in the academic programming planned for IC students.
- Invite Cuban students and professors to IC for exchanges, once the political situation between Cuba and the US allows it.
- Support the continued development of research across institutions when international travel has been restricted.
- Create online activities that ensure continuity in the face of climate, health and other crises.

The proposal is based on the experience of organizing short academic programs in Cuba, such as the Cuban Ecology Laboratory to be held every two years at JBOS, and the four-week summer program at the University of Pinar del Río on ecology and education, along with the program at UCMPR focused on health care, both with the intention of being held annually.

Examples of effective practices

Based on the experiences presented, it has been determined that the following practices can help

ensure the success of interuniversity cooperation:

- Shared research should be at the heart of institutional collaboration. This may involve multiple institutions, multiple programs, disciplines, students and managers. Signing a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with implementation objectives that formalize a set of activities for several years.
- Coordinators should be committed to facilitating communication among faculty who are considering a collaboration of mutual interest and should strive to create opportunities for the dissemination of their scientific results, as well as to obtain the support of managers and decision-makers.
- Offering short, discipline-specific academic programs can serve as a catalyst for the development and participation in longer and more in-depth exchange opportunities.
- When language proficiency makes communication difficult, it is necessary to incorporate bilingual people into the initiative to serve as interpreters and translators.
- Institutions that foster these research pairs must be patient; it takes time for people with similar interests but different research programs to develop a common project.
- Funding for the partnership should be openly and honestly discussed and participating institutions with more available resources should expect to contribute more resources to the initiative where disparities exist between institutions.

CONCLUSIONS

International alliances involving professors and students from different disciplines across the campus are a fundamental tool for the

internationalization of institutions. Interuniversity cooperation is becoming increasingly important in order to improve the quality of academic programming, aimed at meeting the demands of society in an increasingly interconnected world.

The key aspects of the cooperative relationship, which have significantly contributed to its success, have been the commitment to the internationalization of the R&D&I process and the centralized coordination of all activities, while incorporating the largest possible number of participants.

The creation of research peer groups, made up of professors from different institutions and from the same branch of knowledge, can serve as a basis for the development of international collaborations, especially when they are aligned with the institution's internationalization strategy.

The university cooperation described is based on the principles of sustainability, complementarity, inclusion, strengthening of connections and solidarity.

The experience accumulated in the development and management of collaboration between Illinois College, the University of Pinar del Río, the University of Artemisa and the University of Medical Sciences of Pinar del Río demonstrates that it is possible and beneficial to achieve shared objectives between institutions from different countries.

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