WORKING ACROSS CULTURES: BUILDING INTERNATIONAL ALLIANCES

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The importance of collaborative partnerships and international alliances has been well documented. Pesut and Horton-Deutsch (2002) state that developing and sustaining global partnerships is no longer a choice, but an imperative. They believe that the availability of electronic communication has made meaningful dialogue possible with colleagues anywhere in the world. The concept of collaboration is also consistent with the vision of the International Academic Nursing Alliance (IANA) “to create a globally inclusive community of nurse educators, who lead by using technology, collaboration and knowledge to influence nursing education, practice and health care” (Sullivan & Gray, 2002, p.245).

The purpose of this article is to describe how the University of Wisconsin, Oshkosh, College of Nursing (CON) built collaborative partnerships through planning and implementing an international conference in Chennai, India. This endeavor ultimately resulted in an alliance with a community of nurse leaders, educators and scholars.

Background

The CON has committed itself within the past decade to building diverse collaborations. To this end, several faculty and community leaders from India and Thailand were inducted as members into the Eta Pi Chapter, Sigma Theta Tau International (STTI), Honor Society. Initial members included Mrs. Narendra Nagpal, and Mrs. Bimla Kapoor, leaders in Nursing, from New Delhi, and Mr. Ramachandran from Chennai.

At the encouragement and suggestion of our Indian members, the Eta Pi Chapter executive members decided to showcase international nursing research in India. It must be noted that without the expertise, support, vision, commitment, and organizational ability of our Indian nursing colleagues, the conference would never have come to fruition.

The UW Oshkosh College of Nursing (CON) provided technical support for website design, email communication and institutional support for the CON faculty participating in the conference.

The Conference

Despite the concerns related to the events of September 11, 2001, the international conference was a resounding success. There were 55 presenters from 7 countries and more than 150 participants, a much larger event than normally convened by Eta Pi Chapter. The conference, titled The International Health Care Professionals’ Conference: Dialoguing Globally and Culturally was designed to exemplify STTI vision of building diverse collaborations. The conference spanned three days covering diverse health care topics presented by nurses, psychologists and physicians. During break times on all three days, health care professionals from different cultures, religions, and disciplines shared personal stories of patient care. These stories were especially poignant when each realized that despite global differences, health care concerns were similar. On the third and final day of the conference, the Eta Pi Chapter inducted 15 Indian members in a candlelit ceremony.

Lessons Learned from Participating in the Conference

There were many lessons we learned during the entire conference planning, and implementation:

- Communication, Publicity and Financial issues are essential considerations for planning. In addition, individuals with specific skills are critical for interpreting and negotiating the nuances in implementing an international conference.
- Kindness, respect and politeness are demonstrated by all cultures and defy language barriers. Compassion, trustworthiness, fairness, moral fortitude and lack of self-aggrandizement regarding scholarship are well received globally (Carlo & Cipriano-Silva, 2003).
- Clear communication and spending time verifying whether the message is received is important.

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found that it was essential to articulate a specific point, restate the premise and request feedback of understanding. Formal ceremonial recognition is appropriate and provides personal satisfaction. In Indian culture, formality is the norm. This is very different from our seemingly efficient "quick trip" approach to recognizing our colleagues in the United States.

- Nurses' concerns are more similar than dissimilar. Despite the enormity of the distance between India and the United States, there were similar issues among practicing nurses such as pain management of patients, or lack of documentation related to patient care and outcomes. Nurses' educators had concerns related to grading clinical performance. In general, the conference underscored Gray's (2001) emphasis that interactions between colleagues with similar interests can be accomplished through 'connectivity'. Through connection, colleagues can share information about teaching modalities, curriculum development, research projects, faculty opportunities and clinical practice.

- Religion is a critical part of many cultures' care of individuals and groups. Being aware of, and respecting religious beliefs is important. Religious symbols were found everywhere, and these were incorporated in the opening ceremony of the conference.

- Even small chapters working collaboratively with international members can be successful with the assistance of dedicated chapter members and support staff that has the vision and commitment. McElmurry, Misner & Buseh (2003) emphasize the importance of spending time abroad with nursing colleagues from other countries in order to gain cultural immersion. The conference not only helped with the cultural immersion, but also with advancing STTI's vision of increasing global connections, thereby resulting in a coordinated effort in increasing participants' awareness of each other's activities, providing access to information, and enhancing the possibility of establishing potential alliances among other disciplines and schools (Sullivan & Gray, 2002).

In summary, we were honored and proud to have worked on this international conference with our nursing colleagues in India. We believe that the conference served to strengthen and diversify our chapter's membership and providing a venue for discussing global health care issues. We are assured that subsequent friendships and ongoing e-mail communications with health care providers worldwide are remarkable byproducts of this scientific conference.

REFERENCES
Gray, G (2001). The international academic nursing online alliance. Nursing Inquiry, 8, 63.