Issues in Establishing a Sino-American Instructional Site

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Abstract
This paper, based on the experience of the author, describes the process that a public US university went through to establish a cooperative educational program in Beijing, China. The foundation of this venture was rooted in a robust educational and research relationship that was initiated in 2017. This partnership had previously seen success through implementation of a 3+1+1 dual degree program, permitting Chinese students to acquire an undergraduate degree in China and a subsequent M.S. degree in the United States. Furthermore, a joint research symposium had paved the way for the establishment of a collaborative research center, complemented by several instances of faculty members teaching summer courses in China.
In the spring of 2020, in furtherance of their enduring partnership, both institutions jointly submitted a proposal to the Chinese Ministry of Education, seeking to institute a Chinese-Foreign Cooperation in Running Schools (CCE) graduate program. This proposal received official approval from the Chinese Ministry of Education in October 2020. Subsequent approvals for the program were duly secured, first from the educational institution itself and later from the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC) regional accreditor.

The successful initiation of this international educational site necessitated meticulous planning encompassing various aspects, including logistical considerations for program delivery, academic standards, student recruitment, financial agreements, and the assignment of instructors. In August 2023, this program enrolled its inaugural cohort, comprised of 19 students.
This paper describes the development and management of an international instructional site from the reflective standpoint of the author employed in a senior management position. The author provides insights and discussion involving practical experience.

Introduction

The precise definition of an international branch campus remains somewhat ambiguous and lacks universal agreement on a global scale. The term typically refers to an overseas extension of a higher education institution, either wholly owned and operated by the institution itself, or established as a collaborative venture with international institution as a partner [1]. They may offer a range of academic programs, including undergraduate and graduate degrees, as well as certificate programs, language courses, and short-term study abroad opportunities. It was reported that in 2017 there were 263 International Branch Campuses (IBCs) in 77 countries, with China being the number one host [2, 3]. The establishment of international instructional sites reflects the growing trend of globalization in higher education, where institutions seek to expand their reach, promote cross-cultural understanding, and provide students with diverse educational experiences [4]. These sites can cater to both local students seeking an international education without the need to relocate oversees and international students seeking to study abroad or pursue academic opportunities in a different country.

Establishing an international instructional site holds immense value for US universities, offering a multitude of benefits that contribute to their academic reputation, student experience, and global engagement efforts. These sites serve as strategic hubs for expanding the institution's

global footprint, allowing universities to extend their reach and establish a presence in key international markets [2, 5, 6]. Moreover, these sites facilitate academic collaboration and research partnerships on a global scale. By fostering interdisciplinary collaboration between faculty and researchers from different countries, universities can drive innovation, tackle global challenges, and contribute to the advancement of knowledge in various fields [7]. Additionally, establishing international instructional sites enhances the institution's reputation and prestige on the global stage. A US university with a strong presence abroad demonstrates its commitment to internationalization and academic excellence, attracting top talent from around the world and enhancing its competitiveness in the global higher education landscape [4].

Partnership Background and Motivation

The School of Chemical, Materials, and Biomedical Engineering at the University of Georgia (UGA) and Beijing University of Chemical Technology (BUCT) have forged a robust educational and research alliance over the past several years. In 2018, the institutions inaugurated a 3+1+1 dual degree program, facilitating Chinese students' attainment of a Bioengineering undergraduate degree from BUCT and a Biochemical Engineering M.S. degree from UGA. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the program admitted two cohorts, totaling six students, four of whom progressed to a Ph.D. program at UGA. Additionally in the summer of 2018, seven faculty members from the UGA College of Engineering contributed to a collaborative research symposium convened at the Changzhou Institute for Advanced Materials. This laid the groundwork for UGA and BUCT to formalize their partnership by establishing a joint research center in September 2018. Subsequently, faculty from the UGA College of Engineering have actively engaged in teaching summer courses at BUCT, while UGA has welcomed numerous visiting researchers from BUCT to its campus in Athens. These activities laid the groundwork for the two institutions to submit a proposal to the Chinese Ministry of Education to offer a Chinese-Foreign Cooperation in Running Schools (CCE) graduate program. BUCT had previously established CCE programs with four other universities in the U.S. and Europe, enrolling 220-270 students in these programs each year.

The establishment of the CCE graduate program in Biomanufacturing and Bioprocessing was considered to have several benefits for potential students. The field of biomanufacturing serves as the nexus connecting various sectors within the global biotechnology industry, ranging from large-scale production in liquid biofuels to the stringent regulations of biopharmaceuticals. The Masters of Biomanufacturing and Bioprocessing (MBB) program at BUCT would equip engineering and science graduates with the skills necessary for leadership roles in this rapidly expanding field, crucially important on both national and global scales. China, in particular, has recognized the significance of the biotechnology industry, marking it as a top priority. Furthermore, students would benefit from a diverse faculty pool, comprising instructors from both UGA and BUCT, providing an international perspective essential for navigating the global marketplace. The program will also foster enhanced international exchanges and collaborations, thereby increasing student mobility and unlocking additional opportunities. Additionally, Chinese students gain the prestige of obtaining a graduate degree from a renowned US institution.

The approval of the MBB-BUCT program signified a significant opportunity for UGA to gain positive exposure in China. Through strategic dissemination via various media platforms,

including China's influential graduate student recruitment system, it was anticipated that UGA's reputation would be bolstered among millions of prospective Chinese students and parents. BUCT, as a national key university under the Ministry of Education, boasts exceptional programs in bioengineering and materials science and engineering, attracting top-tier talent from China and East Asian countries. Collaborative programs with UGA were poised to attract even more high-caliber candidates, enriching both institutions. Moreover, in addition to teaching, faculty members from both universities could work together on joint research projects, supervising graduate students, publishing research papers, and applying for funds from the government and industries. The Chinese students enrolled in the MBB-BUCT program would also serve as a steady source of international students for UGA's doctoral programs, aligning with our strategic objective of fostering graduate program growth.

Educational Program

The proposed CCE program would enable the University of Georgia to offer the Master of Biomanufacturing and Bioprocessing (MBB) degree program at Beijing University of Chemical Technology (BUCT). The MBB program is a professional master's degree program designed to train engineering and science graduates for leadership roles in the biotechnology industry. While many biotechnology programs touch on biomanufacturing and bioprocessing, the UGA MBB program is unique in its focus on the full biomanufacturing experience with hands-on training and exposure to industrial-grade equipment. Its curriculum includes academic courses in engineering, life science, and business, along with professional training with cutting-edge companies through faculty-led research projects and internships.

To meet the institutional accreditation requirements, the program of study for the MBB offered on the BUCT campus was equivalent to the approved MBB program of study offered on the Athens campus. The criteria for electives or substitutions for specific requirements were equivalent at both locations. Two cooperative modes were proposed for the program: a Single-degree mode and a Double-degree mode. The total maximum recruitment capacity for the program was set at 25 students per year.

In the Single Degree mode, students who successfully fulfilled the MBB requirements and completed the two-year graduate program offered at BUCT earned the MBB degree from UGA. UGA was solely responsible for awarding the MBB degree. The maximum recruitment capacity for the single-degree mode was 20 students per year. Academic requirements for the single degree were determined by UGA and were subject to approval by the Board of Regents of the University System of Georgia. Degree requirements, admissions standards, course content, evaluation of instruction, evaluation of student performance, and provision of student support followed standard UGA policies and practices and were equivalent to the MBB offered at UGA's Athens campus with course instruction in English.

In the Double-degree mode, students who successfully fulfilled all MBB requirements and the requirements for the Master of Engineering in Biological Engineering (MBE) from BUCT, by completing the three-year postgraduate program at BUCT, earned the MBB from UGA and the MBE from BUCT. The MBB from UGA and the MBE from BUCT were independent degrees, and each institution had sole responsibility for awarding the degree for that institution. The maximum recruitment capacity for the double-degree mode was 5 students per year. Apart from

meeting all existing UGA MBB academic requirements, these students met all BUCT MBE requirements. Admissions standards, course content, evaluation of instruction, evaluation of student performance, and provision of student support followed policies and practices at BUCT and UGA.

After completing applicable academic requirements in Beijing, and after receiving the appropriate United States visa, a Program student in Beijing is permitted to switch campus to UGA-Athens for 1-2 semesters to complete the remaining UGA degree requirements. These students are responsible for all tuition (at out-of-state rates), fees, transportation, insurance, living, and all other costs for their stay in the USA. The option to study at UGA-Athens is subject to space availability. UGA students may also study at BUCT, subject to any applicable PRC and BUCT requirements and policies.

Institutional Approvals

The proposal to offer a Chinese-Foreign Cooperation in Running Schools (CCE) graduate program between UGA and BUCT was submitted to the Chinese Ministry of Education in spring 2020. The proposal received official approval from the Chinese Ministry of Education on October 28th, 2020.

Once the initial approval was received from the Chinese Ministry of Education, a proposal was submitted to UGA and the University System of Georgia to offer an external degree program. The UGA Academic Affairs Policy defines external education as "…any credit-bearing course or program of which more than 50% is delivered primarily at locations other than the Athens campus. It is defined by the Board of Regents as face-to-face instruction and interaction between instructor and student when both are located in an environment external to the Athens campus, including established external education campuses." Hence, a proposal to offer an external degree was prepared to allow the School of Chemical, Materials and Biomedical Engineering to offer the MBB degree at the BUCT campus in Beijing, China. The Board of Regents approved the external degree proposal in November 2021.

Finally, a Substantive Change Prospectus was required by our institutional accreditor, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC), to allow us to establish an Off-campus Instructional Site and enter into a Cooperative Academic Arrangement with Non-Title IV Entities. SACSCOC approved UGA's substantive change for the BUCT instructional site in June 2022.

Financial Considerations

The Program relies on tuition revenue from enrolled MBB-BUCT students to sustain its operations. As a non-profit educational initiative, it aims for financial self-sufficiency. The determination of program tuition rates is a collaborative effort between BUCT and UGA, ensuring alignment with academic and financial success metrics. A provision exists for these rates to undergo periodic adjustments based on fiscal and market conditions, subject to approval from relevant local authorities. Annual financial reviews are conducted to assess revenue and expenses incurred in both Athens and China, encompassing personnel costs, equipment, materials, travel, administrative expenses, and program development funds. Students bear

responsibility for all tuition, fees, and additional expenses not covered by scholarships or other financial arrangements.

Program tuition was set at RMB 120,000 per student. An annual review by the Joint Administration Committee (JAC) monitors program revenue and expenses, with any changes in tuition rates requiring mutual agreement and approval from relevant Chinese authorities and the Board of Regents of the University System of Georgia, where applicable.

BUCT compensates UGA for program management, instructor expenses, and administrative personnel travel related to program matters. The management fee, amounting to $32,500 USD (pre-tax) per cohort annually, covers UGA's program management and operational expenses. BUCT directly transfers this fee to UGA's designated official account. The instructor fee, encompassing salary and expenses for one full-time UGA instructor at a rate of $58,000 USD (pre-tax) per year, includes teaching six courses annually (18 hours) in Beijing. Additionally, BUCT covers round-trip airfare and on-campus accommodation for any part-time visiting professors from UGA.

Each year, BUCT covers travel expenses for three UGA administrators for short visits related to the program, including international round-trip airline tickets and accommodation expenses. UGA is not obligated to fund program expenses from general tuition funds or state funding from Georgia. BUCT manages student tuition and fees, disbursing expenses to UGA accordingly.

Teaching Logistics

A nine-month, non-tenure track lecturer was recruited and hired to serve as the MBB (BUCT Campus) graduate director in Beijing. The appointment is 75% instruction and 25% administration. In accordance with the UGA Academic Affairs Policy, an individual with an EFT assignment of 75% instruction should teach 18 credit hours per academic year, or 3 courses per semester.

BUCT faculty may teach courses in person in Beijing. Prior to assigning any BUCT faculty member as the instructor of record for a UGA-approved course, the requisite forms are submitted to the Office of Faculty Affairs in accordance with UGA Academic Affairs Policy. The BUCT faculty member assumes 90% instructional responsibility, while the MBB (BUCT campus) Graduate Director, who is responsible for overseeing all local matters concerning the course sections, takes on 10% instructional responsibility.

UGA courses are currently being taught in Beijing during the spring, summer, and fall terms. Each course offered onsite in Beijing spans approximately 15 weeks of instruction, followed by final exams. Similar to the MBB program offered in Athens, each UGA credit hour corresponds to approximately 750 contact minutes. The specific course calendar is determined collaboratively by both institutions, ensuring alignment with official Chinese holidays and equivalence to the UGA calendar approved for the Athens campus.

During the second year of the MBB program, students participate in a faculty-mentored research project. They work under the mentorship of a faculty member from the biological engineering department at BUCT. The school currently has 24 professors, including 1 member of the Chinese

Academy of Engineering, 2 MOE "Yangtze River Scholar" Distinguished Professors, 2 winners of the National Science Fund for Distinguished Young Scholars, and 23 associate professors. This faculty maintain a high level of research in the fields of cell culture and metabolic engineering, biocatalysis and enzyme engineering, synthesis and system bioengineering, biological drugs and medical materials, biological resources, and environmental engineering.

Challenges in Operationalization

The primary challenges associated with the operationalization of the program were tied to course scheduling. In order for the Registrar to schedule a course, a campus code and building code are required. Hence, a campus code and building code had to be generated, which also needed to be submitted to the University System of Georgia for administrative approval. Once the new codes were approved, the registrar was able to schedule the courses.

Another challenge pertained to student tuition. Typically, when students enroll in a course, tuition and fees are added to their student account. However, for international students, the agreement specified a fixed tuition rate based on local market rates, rather than the established UGA tuition rate for graduate students. According to the agreement, students would pay tuition to BUCT, which would then remit payment to UGA for instructional and administrative costs. To ensure that students in Beijing were not directly billed by UGA, the Bursar created an exception code exempting students enrolled in courses with the BUCT campus code from tuition and fee charges.

The final challenge was related to the academic calendars. At UGA, the fall semester starts mid-August and ends in December. In contrast, the fall semester in China starts a month later, in mid-September and ends in January, before the Chinese New Year. Initially, it was proposed that a new academic calendar would be created for the Chinese program. This is done for other professional programs that do not follow the standard academic calendar, such as the degree programs in Veterinary Medicine and Law. However, the Registrar ultimately decided not to create a new academic calendar for the MBB program in China. Instead, students in the program were asked to complete “Late-Add” forms for each course, as they were registering for the courses outside of the registration window. This also meant that final grades were due before the students in China had finished their semester. Consequently, students were given an Incomplete grade in December, and a grade change was submitted in early February, after the students had taken the final exams and their final grade had been calculated.

The issues associated with course registration are only in problem in the first semester. In all subsequent semesters, students are able to register for courses during the normal registration period. This could potentially be overcome by scheduling New Student Orientation in early August and asking students to enroll in their courses at this time. The issue pertaining to entering final grades occurs during each semester due to the misalignment of the academic calendars at UGA and BUCT. At this time, a potential solution that would avoid the need for the additional administrative paperwork has not been proposed by either the Registrar or the program steering committee.

Summary

In August 2023, the first cohort of 19 students enrolled in the MBB-BUCT program, almost three years after the initial application to the Chinese Ministry of Education had been approved. Establishing this program has required a collaborative approach involving multiple university stakeholders including the Graduate School, the Bursar, the Registrar's Office and Curriculum Systems, Sponsored Programs Administration, the Office of Faculty Affairs, and various academic colleges.

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