

## **Increasing North American Higher Education Cooperation, Collaboration, and Exchange Through a Trilateral Collaboration “Marketplace”**

A collaborative project of the American Council on Education (ACE), la Asociación Nacional de Universidades e Instituciones de Educación Superior (ANUIES), and the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (AUCC), with support from the governments of Canada, Mexico, and the United States.

### **Executive Summary**

#### Project Goals and Rationale

The overall goal of this project has been to find ways to spur renewed vigor in North American academic cooperation, collaboration, and exchange by addressing key obstacles to interchange. The immediate goal was to explore the feasibility of creating a new mechanism that would achieve this purpose, a marketplace for higher education cooperation and exchange.

The project context derives from the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which provides the rationale for government involvement not only in enhancing opportunity, but also in removing barriers that limit the flow of students, scholars, and academic projects across North American borders.

#### Background and Methodology

The American Council on Education (ACE), la Asociación Nacional de Universidades e Instituciones de Educación Superior (ANUIES), and the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (AUCC), based on a memorandum of cooperation among them, and with the support of their three respective governments, undertook this effort with several goals in mind. They were: to test assumptions on barriers to exchange, explore level of interest, analyze 15 existing structured exchange programs, and develop a concept for a marketplace mechanism to facilitate North American higher education collaboration and exchange. An advisory committee of three representatives from each country, and several reference groups of primarily campus-based people in each country, were selected to guide the project. The project was directed by a steering committee of association representatives, and conducted by an independent consultant serving as principal investigator (see Appendix B).

To test assumptions on barriers, determine level of interest in North American collaboration and exchange, and envision enhanced programming through a proposed marketplace model, a survey questionnaire was developed for use at the annual meeting of CONAHEC in Veracruz in October 1999 (see Appendix C). A concept paper was then drafted and circulated for committee member input. This was followed by the development and circulation of a feasibility discussion paper distributed in advance the Advisory Committee's meeting. (For complete project chronology and activities, see Appendix A.)

Additionally, project members studied existing structured exchange programs that might offer relevant formats or ways of addressing barriers. Fifteen were selected; topics for research and information templates were developed, and material presented on each program was reviewed and revised by the staff of each.

The project found that the strengths of existing programs include their ability to address recurring issues through credit recognition agreements, tuition swaps, and language proficiency requirements. Consortial programs, by pooling openings, provide even greater opportunity. Among program limitations, the project found that most (non-governmental) programs are confined to student mobility, rather than the range of possible collaborations; most are based in strict

reciprocity; and most require a significant degree of student financial contribution. Some programs also are restricted through formal competition among selected awardees (see Sections III and IV).

### Obstacles and Barriers Identified

Trilateral discussion since 1992 had revealed at least three significant obstacles to exchange which dampen enthusiasm, limit collaboration, and restrict ease of mobility: (1) asymmetry and differences in national and higher education priorities, needs, and resources; (2) an overall lack of resources and funds for these endeavors; and (3) issues surrounding credit transfer and program recognition. Responses confirmed that these remain crucial barriers to exchange. Additional barriers that emerged from research, feedback, and analysis of existing programs included: (1) lack of language proficiency; (2) difficulty of obtaining visas; (3) faculty disinterest; (4) structural and cultural differences among higher education institutions in the three nations; (5) institutions' limited awareness of exchange possibilities and information resources; and (6) a need to address student advising and service issues.

### Proposing the Marketplace Concept

Based on research and input from the field, a market initiative was proposed that attempted to maximize the advantages of existing programs, address identified obstacles, strike a balance between flexibility and structure, and develop a comprehensive approach to North American collaboration in higher education. The proposed mechanism was a multifunction marketplace with a four-tier structure, governed under a written framework document, and based in trading program elements in an effort to balance needs and interests among participating institutions over time.

This mechanism addressed at least two key obstacles directly: differing and asymmetrical needs and priorities and credit, course recognition, and transfer. Other obstacles that lie in part outside the marketplace mechanism, but affect its successful functioning (including visas and language proficiency), as well as the broader higher education context of exchange (including university leadership, faculty, and student issues) were addressed. Resource issues were treated not as stand-alone barriers, but within discussions of topics to which they relate. Approaches to revenue generation also were suggested (see Section III).

### Conclusions and Recommendations

The advisory committee at its March 2000 meeting to determine whether or not to proceed with the design of this comprehensive multi-tiered marketplace considered the history of trilateral discussion; reviewed reasons that trilateral exchange activity fell short of hopes; analyzed specific obstacles to interchange; focused on the research, analyses, and concepts posed in the studies; and scanned the current environment. After careful consideration the committee determined that:

- Sustainable support for a complex new structure would be difficult to ensure and a new structure may not be the best way to address current obstacles. Existing institutions play roles which can be deepened or expanded, and new formal systems to equalize asymmetries and differing priorities may be less practical (and cost-effective) than individual case-by-case agreements based on best practices, without formal structures and systems.
- To bolster student interest in international exchange, student mobility needs to be viewed not only as traditional language- and culture-based "junior year abroad," but also and alternatively as an opportunity for career and professional development. This approach is also consistent with the economic cooperation and trade goals underlying NAFTA.
- Incentives for mobility in North America differ from those in Europe, where the political, cultural, and economic incentives are in building a European identity, and governments fund exchanges.

- Because of institutional autonomy and differences in higher education systems and approaches, comprehensive systems do not work to address course and credit recognition, accreditation, and other quality assurance issues in North America (see Section III and Appendix D).

Therefore, the advisory committee recommended the following to the Trilateral Steering Committee, as incorporated into a March 28, 2000, letter to the three governments (see Appendix E):

- That the single most important measure to foster student exchanges is to provide need-based student "top-up" awards. Such awards will catalyze and capitalize on institution-to-institution opportunities for exchange and collaboration. Without such support to expand access to exchange, mobility will remain marginal rather than transformative for North America.
- That while a complex new program will not be the most effective approach, a "virtual marketplace" is the most cost-effective, productive, and sustainable approach to fostering North American interchange. Therefore, the principal investigator was charged with developing elements of such an electronic site. The resultant paper outlines issues, examples of existing sites, and categories of content, including best practices and guidelines for creating partnerships.
- That work-based opportunities for learning abroad (e.g., cooperative education, internships, work-study, experiential education) are a promising direction for enhancing and broadening North American interchange, and are consistent with the goals of NAFTA. Therefore, the principal investigator was charged with developing a short paper on this topic. The resultant paper focuses on issues, examples of existing programs, recommendations, sources, and resources.
- That given the complexity of developing and implementing trilateral/international collaboration, some efforts will be more successful if they involve two countries at a time rather than all three at once (bilateral programs within a trilateral context to supplement, but not replace, trilateral programs).
- That there is need to recognize and address problems with visas as actual or perceived barriers to exchange, especially in regard to work-study and cooperative education programs and internships.

The associations are grateful for this opportunity. They believe that identifying and exploring obstacles to exchange, testing the feasibility of a comprehensive marketplace model, researching and analyzing a range of issues and models, and incorporating feedback from the field, have been valuable. These efforts have provided the opportunity not only to develop products that may foster North American interchange, but also to recommend cost-effective and productive approaches for the use of limited government resources toward leveraging the greatest results and most sustainable outcomes in our current environment.

*Postscripts:*

President Clinton's International Education Policy, announced in a memorandum of April 19, 2000, made a significant statement in advancing policy issues (see Appendix F).

Another postscript to the current trilateral project is the recent announcement of support for the Consortium for North American Higher Education Collaboration (CONAHEC) and the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE) to strengthen and expand web-based information and exchange for North America, explore tuition swaps, and evaluate trilateral efforts. Reports and documents of this current trilateral project summarized above will be posted at <http://www.elnet.org>.