

BUILDING INTERNATIONAL PARTNERSHIPS FOR STEM

Systems Thinking Brainstorming Guide

Prepared by Dr. Stephanie Kim, Lone Star College

Purpose

- This guide focuses on one central question: How do we find, assess, and build lasting international partnerships with universities, research institutions, government agencies, and cultural organizations?
- A systems thinking lens asks: What assets and relationships already exist in our ecosystem that we can connect and leverage to build something sustainable?

1. What Does Your Institution Bring to a Partnership?

Before approaching any external partner, you need a clear picture of your own institutional value proposition.

A. Your STEM Assets — What Can You Offer a Partner Institution?

- Which STEM disciplines are strongest? Are there research specializations, lab facilities, or STEM programs of international note?
- Do any faculty hold grants, publications, or affiliations that would be attractive to foreign institutions?
- Do you have any existing international credentials, accreditations, or recognized programs?

List your most compelling assets:



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B. Existing Faculty Connections & Networks — Mine These First

Faculty are often the fastest path to a credible partnership. Before looking externally, inventory what your faculty already have.

Faculty International Connections	Countries / Institutions Named
Co-authored research with foreign scholars	Ask faculty: Where would YOU want to send students?
Attended or presented at international conferences	Which institutions do you most respect in your field?
Graduate training at foreign institution	Do you have a contact who could open a door?
Active correspondence with foreign researchers	Would you be willing to co-design a program?
Family, cultural, or language ties abroad	

C. Institutional Priorities — What Regions & Fields Must the Partnership Serve?

- Does your institution's strategic plan name specific world regions or global themes (e.g., artificial intelligence, infrastructure)?
- Are there workforce development goals tied to specific industries with international dimensions?
- Which academic departments or deans are most likely to champion an international partnership?

Ideas for faculty connections and aligning proposal with institutional strategic goals:

2. Assessing & Vetting Potential Partners

Not every willing institution is a good fit. A systems thinking approach means evaluating alignment across multiple dimensions before investing in a formal agreement.

✅ Green Flags — Signs of a Strong Partner	⚠️ Red Flags — Proceed with Caution
Clear institutional champion on their side	Interest is top-down only — no faculty buy-in
Complementary (not identical) STEM strengths	Primarily seeking revenue, not academic exchange
Experience hosting international students/faculty	Weak English or language support infrastructure
Stable funding and accreditation in home country	Unstable political/safety environment
Shared values	Reciprocity imbalance — they want more than they give
Responsive, specific communication	No clear contact or unclear decision-making

Key Questions to Investigate Before Signing Any Agreement

- What is their accreditation status and academic calendar? Are STEM courses transferable to your institution? Or does that matter?
- What is their capacity to host students — housing, safety infrastructure, health services, language support?
- Do they have experience with U.S. institutions? What can we learn from those prior partnerships?
- What do THEY want from this partnership? Is it sustainable mutual benefit or one-directional?
- What are the visa, legal, and data-privacy implications of a formal agreement in that country?

Vetting questions to add for our context:

3. Leveraging the Broader Ecosystem to Support the Partnership

Cross-Campus Leverage — Who Else Should Be in This Conversation?

- Office of Sponsored Programs: grant infrastructure and compliance expertise for international projects.
- General Counsel / Risk Management: essential for MOU review, liability, and data privacy questions.
- Registrar & Academic Affairs: credit transfer policy, transcript evaluation, and degree audit implications.
- Student Affairs & Health Services: support infrastructure for students going and coming.
- Alumni Affairs: identify alumni living or working abroad who can serve as connectors or hosts.
- Institutional Research: enrollment data, student demographics, and outcome tracking for grant reporting.
- Financial Aid: existing scholarships and impact of study abroad scholarships on financial need and awards
- Divisional or Departmental Deans or Administrators: faculty selection and identifying programs for the partnership

4. Sustaining the Partnership Over Time

Most partnerships fail not at launch but in years two and three, when the founding champion moves on or initial enthusiasm fades. Plan for sustainability at the start.

Sustainability Questions — Discuss with Your Group

- **Faculty recruitment pipeline:** Is there a structured, repeating process for identifying and onboarding faculty who will lead or co-teach study abroad courses? Beyond the founding champion, which departments have faculty with the interest, international background, or research ties to sustain course offerings? Consider a faculty interest survey every 18–24 months, a small stipend or reassigned time for curriculum development, and recognition in annual reviews for international engagement. New faculty hires are an especially important opportunity — international experience should be surfaced during onboarding and connected early to program leadership.
- **Student recruitment pipeline:** Sustainable enrollment in study abroad courses requires proactive, layered outreach — not just a flyer in the hallway. Build a recruitment calendar that begins 6–9 months before departure: department presentations in gateway courses (e.g., intro STEM sequences), faculty-to-student conversations in office hours, peer ambassador programs where returning students recruit the next cohort, and targeted outreach to campus student clubs. Address

cost barriers explicitly by promoting available scholarships, Gilman eligibility, and payment plan options early in recruitment.

- **Data & outcomes:** Who collects and shares data on student/faculty outcomes? How does that data feed back into program improvement?
- **Institutional memory:** Are partner contacts, program logistics, and agreement history documented and stored beyond one person's email inbox?
- **Funding:** Is the partnership dependent on a single grant or champion's budget? What happens when that funding ends?

Sustaining Robust Recruitment of Faculty and Students

The most carefully structured partnership collapses without a steady stream of faculty willing to lead programs and students willing to enroll. Recruitment is not a one-time launch activity — it requires an annual, institutionalized cycle that runs independently of any single champion.

Faculty Recruitment Strategies

- **Conduct a biennial faculty interest survey.** Ask faculty every 18–24 months whether they have international contacts, research interests, or willingness to co-teach or lead a study abroad course.
- **Provide meaningful incentives.** Course development stipends, reassigned time during the planning semester, travel support, and recognition in annual performance reviews all signal that international engagement is institutionally valued — not just personally admirable. Without structural incentives, international course development consistently loses out to grant deadlines and publication pressure.
- **Engage new faculty at onboarding.** New hires are a high-yield recruitment opportunity. During faculty orientation, share information about existing international partnerships and invite new faculty to connect with program coordinators early — before their course loads solidify.
- **Build a faculty advisory committee.** A rotating committee of 3–5 faculty across departments distributes program stewardship and creates a natural succession path. Committee members can serve as departmental liaisons who promote study abroad opportunities to colleagues and flag potential new course leaders.
- **Co-teaching as an on-ramp.** Pair an experienced program leader with a first-time faculty participant for at least one cycle before expecting independent leadership. Shadowing reduces the barrier to entry and accelerates the depth of the faculty pipeline.

Student Recruitment Strategies

- **Build a structured annual recruitment calendar.** Begin outreach 6–9 months before the program departure date. Key touchpoints: a faculty plug-in to gateway STEM courses (e.g., intro sequences, lab sections) in the semester before applications open; an info session during the first week of the prior term; and follow-up outreach to students who expressed interest but did not yet apply.

- **Use peer ambassadors.** Returning students are your most credible recruiters. Create a formal ambassador role — with a small honorarium, an official title, or co-curricular transcript recognition — and deploy them in classrooms, club meetings, and advising fairs.
- **Address cost barriers head-on.** Cost is the single most commonly cited barrier to student participation. Lead with financial accessibility in all recruitment messaging: communicate Gilman Scholarship eligibility, institutional scholarships, financial aid applicability, and payment plan options in the very first touchpoint — not buried in the application FAQ. Host a dedicated “Paying for Study Abroad” workshop early in the recruitment cycle.
- **Track what actually works.** Ask every enrolled student: “How did you first hear about this program, and what was the deciding factor in applying?” Track this data year over year. Recruitment channels that generate inquiries but not applications should be deprioritized in favor of channels that produce enrolled students. This annual feedback loop is what separates a sustainable recruitment system from one that relies on luck and momentum.

Brainstorm prompt: Which of these recruitment strategies could you realistically launch in the next academic year? Who on campus would need to own each one?

5. Your Next Steps — Commit Before You Leave

My Personal Commitment from This Session

Identify at least 3 high-priority action items with deadlines and ownership:

- _____
- _____
- _____

Authorship & Attribution

Prepared by: Stephanie Kim, Ph.D., Director, The Honors College at Lone Star College University Park.

Contributing editors: Katharine Caruso, Ph.D., Associate Vice Chancellor, Honors and International Education, Lone Star College; Aurora Lugo, M.S., Director, The Honors College at Lone Star College CyFair; and Ava Veselis, M.A., former Director, The Honors College at Lone Star College Tomball.

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