

How to Create an International Strategy Champion

As institutions increasingly operate in a global environment, leaders find themselves entering into a proliferation of agreements with other colleges and universities across the world. International collaborations cut across the entire portfolio of an institution, including research, student recruitment, study abroad, academic programing, and transnational education. While these international engagements can bring many benefits, their logistical complexity and reputational prominence also create significant risks.

To maximize benefits and minimize risks, universities should create an international strategy champion. Empowering a single role to oversee international strategy and global engagements helps ensure institutional stakeholders collaborate effectively while preventing partnerships from stagnating or become unsustainable. While this champion role will look different on every campus, there are four key responsibilities it should always possess:

+ Asset Manager

- Identify, record, and track all partnerships
- Understand academic strengths and institutional reputation
- Collect and monitor partnership data

+ Communicator

- Share results of successful partnerships
- Translate international imperatives for various stakeholders
- Understand, shape, and enhance image and reputation abroad

+ Facilitator

- Make connections between faculty working on similar projects
- Create opportunities for program leaders at different universities to interact with one another
- Bring institution-level international leaders together to set and execute strategy

+ Educator

- Explain foreign interference, legal, and ethical risks
- Inform stakeholders of benefits of potential partnerships and regions
- Provide data about prospective partners

Having analyzed the organizational structures and job descriptions of international strategy champions at universities around the world, EAB has identified three main models for empowering an international strategy champion. Each of these models has unique strengths and limitations, as outlined below.

Model 1

International Champion Embedded within Units



Description

- An international strategy champion that oversees international activities is integrated in each unit (e.g., research, enrollment management, study abroad, advancement)
- Unit-level champion coordinates international activities for their respective unit, such as introducing faculty to research contacts at international institutions or creating new opportunities for students to study abroad
- Champions across units work together, when possible, to drive institution-level goals for internationalization, such as prioritizing and coordinating relationships with certain regions or institutions
- Sample job titles: Director of International Partnerships, Associate Dean of International, Director of Global Strategy



Advantages

- Requires fewer resources and buy-in than an executive-level position
- Allows for increased focus on international activity in the unit the strategy champion works within



Considerations

- Strategy champions within each unit report to their unit-level leader, rather than one executive, potentially leading to conflicting priorities and initiatives
- Consider ways to empower unit-level champions to work together and coordinate international strategy at an institution-level (e.g., an international committee); a divisional-level leader may not naturally feel empowered to help coordinate an institution-level strategy for internationalization

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Model 2

Executive Coordinating Across Units



Description

- International strategy champion supports, but does not directly oversee, a broad portfolio of international activities at the institution
- Works with relevant units across campus to execute an institution-level international strategy. These activities should augment and enhance the operational activities of each unit, and may include:
 1. Educating stakeholders, particularly faculty, about the university's internationalization priorities (e.g., certain regions, institutions, or disciplines)
 2. Helping stakeholders navigate the international landscape, such as providing them with data about prospective partners or introducing them to prospective partners
 3. Educating stakeholders about partnership risks, such as foreign interference, legal, financial, or ethical concerns
- The international champion should coordinate efforts between various units as well, sharing relevant unit and institutional data, communicating changes in priorities, and convening leaders for broad-level discussions and collaboration efforts
- Gather and use partnership data from each unit to better understand the institution's strengths, identify areas to deepen partnerships, or identify unsuccessful partnerships to be discontinued
- Sample Job Titles: Vice President of International Partnerships, Associate Vice President for Internationalization



Advantages

- The international champion is able to focus their efforts on strategy, support, and stakeholder education, rather than time-consuming internationally-focused operations
- The champion has a broad outlook on institutional strategy and is not limited to the success of one particular unit over another



Considerations

- Ensure the international strategy champion holds a cabinet-level position and reports to the President or another senior executive. An elevated role gives the international champion the credibility to work with other units and set an institution-level internationalization strategy.
- Without direct responsibility over any unit, champions in this model may struggle to articulate success. Identify clear key performance indicators and goals for the role that both align with individual unit successes but capture increase collaboration, communication, and stakeholder education.

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Model 3

Executive Directly Overseeing International Activities



Description

- Oversees majority of international activities at institution, including operational and strategic activities
- Manages a dedicated international unit (e.g., Office of Global Engagement) with staff that execute international activities
- For international units not directly overseen (if any), the international champion works with those executives to coordinate and drive institution-level strategy
- Prioritizes partnership resources based on data and institutional priorities, such as by region, institutional partner, discipline, or issue area (e.g., climate change)
- Sample job titles: Chief Global Officer, Vice President of Global Engagement, Vice Chancellor of Global Affairs



Advantages

- Centralizing majority of international activities under one office gives the champion the authority to design, execute, and hold accountable different international engagements, in alignment with the internationalization strategic plan for the institution
- Strategy champion manages international partnerships resources directly, ensuring they are used to incentivize certain activities or achieve targeted institution-level objectives



Considerations

- Consider keeping the operational activities for the largest international activities within their home units to enable the strategy champion to spend more time on strategic activities (e.g., partnership identification, building networks, partnership evaluation). For example, keep international student recruiting operational activity within the enrollment unit to prevent the champion from becoming too focused on this large engagement at the cost of other priorities.
- This model is easiest to implement at institutions with existing global engagement units. If international activities live in disparate units across campus, leaders may experience more resistance to moving international activities under one unit.
- This role should report to the President or senior member of the cabinet.

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Key qualifications

While the qualities for an international strategy champion may vary depending on level, title, and institution type, successful international strategy champions share the following qualities:



Administrative qualifications

While many international strategy champions have strong academic qualifications (e.g., tenured professor, PhD holder), a successful candidate will also have experience administratively, particularly in the international space. This may include opening or running an internationally focused research institute, supervising an international research facility, running an international unit on campus, or serving as a dean in the international space (e.g., transnational education, South East Asian Affairs).



Relationship building experience

International strategy champions often act as an ambassador for the institution to universities, corporations, and governments abroad. A candidate should also be able to leverage past relationships to initiate new partnership opportunities.



Knowledge of international market

Candidates should possess a strong understanding of the international landscape including intercultural awareness, geopolitical climates and associated risks, knowledge of emerging markets, and experience working in international settings.

Additional insights for success

The different models for an international strategy champion role will produce varying levels of impact.

Embedding an international champion within each relevant unit gives them each less overall authority and may lead to competing priorities. International champions as executives have more institution-level oversight and serve as a dedicated point person for all international activities. If possible, implement an executive-led model to maximize impact and allow the international strategy champion to focus the vast majority of their time on strategic activities.

Results produced by an international strategy champion will take time to manifest.

For example, student exchange or dual degree programs may take one to two years to see increased student participation after the first cohort (e.g., word-of-mouth from the first cohort increases interest and subsequent participation). For research partnerships, co-publications and citations often take five plus years to manifest.

Seek out forward-looking metrics to evaluate research partnership's success.

Evaluate metrics such as mutual numbers of students exchanged, grants, faculty and staff professional development exchanges, and new partnerships formed as a result of the original research partnership. Additionally, evaluate qualitative factors such as inclusivity, trust, and responsiveness that highlight partner reliability.