

A STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY AND BABEȘ-BOLYAI UNIVERSITY: BUILDING AN INTER- NATIONAL EDUCATIONAL HUB

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Abstract

The cooperation between Michigan State University and Babeș Bolyai University has started more than 17 years ago with traditional faculty members' exchanges and since then has further grown into a strategic partnership. This partnership is now moving toward an important step namely the establishment of an educational hub in Cluj-Napoca, Romania.

Keywords: educational hub, university cooperation, Babeș Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Michigan State University.



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The special issue of the Transylvanian Review of Administrative Sciences (TRAS) is dedicated to the papers presented during the 2012 BBU-MSU annual conference entitled *The University and Local Community Development: Critical but Delicate Relationship*, which took place in Cluj-Napoca, Romania between the 18th and 20th of May, 2012. Nonetheless, the special issue represents also a tribute brought to an exceptional university relationship which has generated important innovations concerning the international cooperation between Europe and US.

The contemporary university world can no longer ignore the changes taking place within the society. Increased mobility, broad access to technology, benchmarking practices which allow for the comparison of international practices and performances have generated a tremendous pressure upon universities worldwide. Traditional teaching, research and financing methods at the university level are now complemented by new approaches. The requirements of the 'clients' and their profile are rapidly changing.

Cooperation between universities is no longer a mere appendix of their core activities. It is becoming a strategic element which can influence, either positively or negatively, the competitive profile of academic programs. Internationalization, attraction of foreign students and faculty, international publications, involvement in multinational research programs have turned into basic requirements to be met by top universities.

Aside from the traditional approaches to internationalization (student and faculty exchanges, conferences etc.), universities need to look towards new ways of cooperation ranging from integrated research projects to granting double or joint degrees and outreach activities.

In this context the cooperation between BBU and MSU has a great relevance. Starting more than 17 years ago, the activities undertaken as part of this cooperation have been varied – student and faculty exchanges, joint researches and publications, community outreach (the two cities which house the two cooperating universities became sister cities and are developing joint programs based on the university cooperation) etc. At this point in time the intention of the two partner universities is to take this 17 year relationship and to turn it into something innovative, based on an integrated view with regard to higher education – the establishment of an educational hub based on joint programs between US and Europe, capable of offering a broad educational package (academic programs, training for public officials, applied research at the community level).

Why Cluj-Napoca? There are several reasons that indicate Cluj-Napoca as the ideal place for the establishment and the development of a strategic partnership between Michigan State University, East Lansing, US, and Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania.

Geographic position – Located in the heart of Transylvania, one of the most important cultural and economic regions of Romania, Cluj-Napoca can be regarded as an access gate toward both the Eastern as well as the Western side of Europe's education market.

From the East, there is tremendous interest expressed by students coming from the former Soviet Union and its satellite countries to study in Eastern European universities which offer degree programs comparable in content and quality to those offered by universities in the countries of Western Europe but at a significantly lower cost. From the West, students are expressing interest in getting acquainted with the culture, traditions, as well as the educational system from the former communist countries – this is evident from the increasing number of ERASMUS students who apply for short term exchange studies.

Cluj-Napoca is a well-known university town – Cluj-Napoca is the second university center in Romania in terms of student population after Bucharest, the capital city, having a number of six major public universities whose enrollment in 2011 accounted for more than 53,000 students. The six public universities are: The Technical University (Engineering School); The University for Agricultural Studies and Veterinary Medicine; Babeş-Bolyai University, Medical School Iuliu Hațieganu, the Music Academy Gheorghe Dima, and the Arts and Design University. Initially founded in 1581, Babeş-Bolyai University is currently among the top research universities in Romania, with more than 35,000 students enrolled in all the degree and non-degree programs offered.

A top Public Administration Program at Babeş-Bolyai University – Based on the national accreditation and ranking of all universities in Romania that took place in 2011, the Public Administration Department at Babeş-Bolyai University was ranked first in the country with respect to both its bachelor and master programs. The master program in English is also accredited by one of the most prestigious accreditation body in Europe – EAPAA, and it was the first program in Romania to obtain this accreditation. Both the national ranking and the European accreditation are guarantees with regard to the quality of the programs offered and with regard to the compatibility of the curriculum offered by the Public Administration Department with what is being taught elsewhere at the international level.

A 17 years old relationship between Michigan State University and Babeş-Bolyai University – Michigan State University has had a continuously active, 17-year relationship with Babeş-Bolyai University in Cluj-Napoca, Romania. The relationship has been extensive, involving several units at both schools and encompassing activities across the missions of both universities. At least 100 faculty members from MSU have been to BBU for university related endeavors during the 17 years including deans, center directors and an acting provost. At least 50 BBU faculty members have come to MSU. Three major conferences have been jointly sponsored and managed by the two universities. Innumerable student exchanges have taken place, scholarly research completed and published, and joint research and exchange grants have been awarded involving the two universities. The university linkage has also fostered a formalized city-to-city relationship between the two universities' home cities, Cluj-Napoca and East Lansing. City officials have exchanged visits, compared information and ideas, and jointly sought the outreach assistance of the two universities. Students from each university have interned in the city hall of the other home city. Members of the BBU faculty have

earned degrees at MSU and at least two MSU faculty members are graduates of BBU. A wide variety of individuals from BBU and Cluj-Napoca have been visiting scholars at MSU, often while serving as Fulbright Fellows, Marie Curie Fellows, European Union Scholars, Humphrey Fellows or holding a variety of other distinguished positions.

A tremendous practical administrative experience and political leadership originating at the Public Administration Department level – In many countries in transition the educational sector (especially certain fields) can represent an important pool for selecting top executive public servants, advisers, political leaders etc. A fair number of faculty have had in the last years important positions in the government, thus having the possibility to influence the policy making process and to infuse it with the modern values of public administration education. Such positions include a Prime Minister of Romania, a Minister of Education, a Deputy Minister of the Interior (Secretary of State), a deputy Minister of Finance, a Deputy Minister of Higher-Education, a State Secretary for Strategic Planning, Chief of Staff to the Prime Minister, several members of the Prime Minister's internal staff, The Director of the National Chancellery, Counselor to the Minister of the Interior, Mayor of Cluj-Napoca, former President of the National Ruling Party, Leaders of the Parliament, Chair of the National Judiciary Committee and Romanian MP to the European Union Parliament.

Expertise in educational programs that link the West and the East – From a strategic point of view, there has been a growing interest in linking the education and various programs from the Eastern countries to the realities of the West. At least in the field of public administration there are numerous institutional mechanisms – East/West joint conferences, exchange programs etc. through which a bridge is created between East and West. The Public Administration Department at BBU has been involved in this type of cooperation mechanisms for the past 20 years.

Expertise in working with societies in transition – Countries undergoing political and economic transition possess specific characteristics which sometimes pose challenges for the implementation of policies that have proven successful in other parts of the world. The educational sector is no exception. Therefore, in order to be able to get access to the educational market and the resources available in the former Soviet Union and its satellite countries, as well as in the former communist countries a good understanding of how these countries work represents an advantage. Individuals in leadership positions at the department and school level have been involved in various cooperation mechanisms at the level of the former communist countries, thus having a deep understanding of the problems these countries face and in terms of the specificity of the educational sector in these countries.

Main objective of the partnership

The main goal of the partnership is the establishment and the development of an educational hub which will allow the two partner universities to have a wide access to a regional and/or international educational market characterized by a pool of significant resources available for investment in educational and training activities both on the medium and on the long run.

In line with the main goal of the partnership there are four main statements that characterize the establishment and the future development of the partnership.

The creation of a new approach with regard to international cooperation between universities which goes beyond the traditional mechanisms for cooperation – student and faculty exchanges, conferences, joint publication of articles, and strives to build a strategic partnership by integrating the disparate objectives and mechanisms of traditional cooperation with the goal of obtaining a relevant position on the global educational market.

The new strategic partnership will be developed by *integrating the new communication technologies into the institutional framework of the partnership* as well as into the training, teaching, and research activities undertaken and by transforming the advantages associated with the use of ICTs into a competitive edge on the global education market.

The establishment and the development of an educational program which at its fullest *will offer a US-EU degree* which will attract a steady and growing number of international students as well as significant financial resources.

The educational philosophy underlying the teaching, training, and research activities undertaken in the framework of the partnership strives to offer an *integrated view of public and non-profit sector education*.

A first step in the development of a more formal partnership between MSU-BBU is the creation of an institutional framework which will act as the umbrella for all the activities that will be jointly undertaken. The partners have agreed to establish a Transatlantic Institute for Sustainable Communities and Public Services Management (interim name). Four types of activities will be carried out at the Institute:

- 1. Education** – the final goal in this area is to develop over time a graduate program whose students will receive a dual MSU-BBU degree. There are three types of potential candidates for such a program – Romanian students, American students, and international students (a significant share is expected to come from the former communist countries and the former Soviet Union). In a complex educational market universities have to acknowledge the fact that various students have different needs and that financial resources are available for both traditional, full degree programs as well as for other types of non-traditional programs – lifelong education, individual classes in specific concentration areas, training for mid-career people etc. Therefore, we strive to offer the potential candidates with a more flexible structure with regard to the type of program/degree they want to pursue: full dual degree; minor/major from the partner university; transcriptable certificates; and individual classes.
- 2. Research** – it is important that faculty from the two partner universities get involved in common research projects. At this initial stage a first step in this direction is to create a data base with the faculty members and the researchers at each university so that people with similar research interest could easily identify their counterparts and start working together. Another activity on the common research agenda is to have annually a local survey on a topic that is agreed in

advance between the two partner universities. Such surveys provided they tackle issues of interest for the local community and the local decision-makers have the advantage of bringing more visibility and media coverage for the partnership between the two universities. A pilot study at the level of Cluj-Napoca will be conducted in the near future with help of experts from Michigan State. The aim of the study is to create an index for measuring the quality of life in Cluj-Napoca and hopefully to create the tradition of conducting such a survey on a yearly basis. A final initiative in this area is represented by the publication of books containing case studies done either following a common methodology or conducted jointly.

3. **Training for public officials** – in Romania as well as in the neighboring countries there is a tremendous need for building expertise and know-how at the level of public sector institutions. Very often individuals occupying key administrative positions do not have the proper training for the job. Therefore there is a potential market for training. A first pilot training program will be launched in the near future targeting city managers. This is a position recently created by law in Romania and numerous city managers have no experience in this field. This training program will be offered by MSU, BBU and in partnership with ICMA.
4. **Community outreach** – at least in Romania but in other former communist countries as well universities are mainly seen as educational providers, without an active role in the communities they are located in. It is very rare for universities/ departments to lend their expertise to the local community. As of now there are three distinct types of community outreach activities. The first refers to the involvement of a team of MSU experts in the strategic planning process currently underway at the level of the city of Cluj-Napoca. The city is currently updating its master plan and the expertise of the MSU team will represent an invaluable input into the strategic planning process. Second, both partner universities will have teams of people involved in the process of adopting a small local community located in the vicinity of Cluj-Napoca, namely Beliș. The teams will work with the city hall toward identifying ways in which the community can develop in the future without negatively impacting the ecosystem it is located in – near an artificial lake, which provides the drinkable water for the city of Cluj-Napoca; also in the middle of an important forest. Third, it will design a set of best practices derived from work carried out in Michigan that focuses on place making initiatives. Realtors work with the local community for identifying and implementing incremental changes in their community.

The MSU-BBU relationship can represent in the near future a model for university development based on a complex international cooperation, focused on the needs of the university as well as of the community. It can represent a model of best practice in the new university environment.