

Global Engagement and the College of Agriculture and Natural Resources:  
A report on some preliminary strategic conversations.

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*Land-grant has become global-grant. And as in 1855, Michigan State University will lead the revolution. Boldness by Design, 2005<sup>1</sup>.*

Working Summary

- In response to a request by Dean Armstrong to the directors and to the Senior Associate Dean Frank Fear (the appointed point-person), a number of strategic conversations about 'global engagement and CANR' were conducted in early October with different individuals and groups. As Dr Fear had stated in his invitation to departmental chairs, this would be part of "a series of conversations, followed by a planning exercise, which is designed to yield a set of outcomes that will enable us to reform (fix what needs fixing) and transform (create new approaches and systems)our work, simultaneously and continuously".
- The aim was not to conduct a comprehensive review of international activities within the College, but to foster open conversations about a wide range of issues that participants in the discussions felt were of relevance to the theme of CANR current international activities and the future potential to contribute to 'global engagement'.
- These relatively unstructured, open conversations, of 60 to 90 minute duration, were facilitated by the author of this report, and were framed around the following questions:
  - What are we currently doing in the name of 'global engagement' (or at least international involvement) within CANR? And what is the context for this work?
  - What are we currently not doing that we ought to be doing, or that we have done successfully in the past but for one reason or another have abandoned?
  - What are the current challenges and impediments - both internal and external to the university - to what we are currently doing or would like to do in the future? How are we responding to these challenges and impediments?
  - How should we be things differently and what different things should we be doing?
- Considerable background material, current information and statistics etc were also made available to the facilitator in hard copy as well

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<sup>1</sup> *Boldness by Design – Strategic Positioning of Michigan State University for national and international leadership as the premier land grant university of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. MSU Board of Trustees, 2005.*

as through internet connections, web pages etc. The Office of International Development (OID) was a particularly rich source of such material.

- While the limited time availability of the facilitator restricted the initiative to only 6 actual conversations over four days - involving some 20 participants in all - there was universal support for the initiative among those who did participate.
- The discussions consistently revealed a prevailing sense of disappointment that, in spite of a history of more than half a century of successful involvement in international activities, CANR is not currently characterized by a pervasive culture of commitment to such activities: Indeed there is a widespread perception that there is considerable lack of interest in (and even antipathy towards) international involvement among many faculty and department chairs within the college.
- An opportunity to participate in College-wide discussions about this situation, and to contribute to the development of a clear coherent strategic direction for future global engagement, is clearly appreciated by those who are among the most internationally active faculty.
- Three issues of particular importance emerged from the conversations:
  - In the absence, at College level, of an articulated coherent vision and a clear strategic direction, the current motivations for CANR faculty involvement in international activities are many and varied - a characteristic that is shared by the nature of the programs and projects themselves.
  - Those who are currently involved in such activities face a number of very difficult challenges that are associated with constraining factors that are both external and internal to the University, and which are in urgent need of institutional attention, and
  - Any new strategic directions, within a context of 'global engagement', will bring new sets of additional challenges that will demand focused discussion, effective leadership, and fresh resources, and will therefore require widespread support across the College, and the university as a whole, if they are to be effectively embraced.
- The conversations revealed varying interpretations of the notion of "global engagement" or "global encountering" with little indication of active discussions across the College to date about what these terms might mean in contrast to the more conventional nature of the international activities in which MSU has long been involved, and for which it has established enviable reputations in many parts of the developing world.
- The conversations and records alike did reveal the fact that a significant number of CANR faculty are currently 'engaged' in

international activities in agriculture and natural resources across an amazingly diverse range of forms of 'engagement'. These range from

- o *ad hoc*, often opportunistic involvement in programs of study abroad with undergraduate students as well as in short-term research and consultancy projects,
  - o through more enduring collaborative academic research and education projects with partners in various countries of the world,
  - o to very long-term capacity-building multi-stakeholder relationships in research, development and policy-making projects in particular regions of the world and/or with particular commodities or natural resources or development themes: And much else in between.
- While a wide variety of different funding agencies supports this impressively diverse array of international activities within CANR, there is considerable and disproportionate reliance on USAID as the major donor. This situation is fueling an increasing sense of vulnerability within CANR, especially at a time when the priorities of that agency are clearly shifting to privilege much shorter term projects than have been traditionally supported.
  - Many of the initiatives in agriculture and natural resource programs and activities are promoted, facilitated and/or coordinated by the Institute of International Agriculture (IIA) which, as its mission states, provides leadership in the development, oversight, and administrative support of international projects/programs within CANR. Some however, see the need for there to be much greater integration between the IIA and the academic, research and extension programs of the College and indeed of the university at large.
  - There is a feeling that much more needs to be done to promote and nurture a culture of commitment to international activities within the College with the concomitant development of systems of support appropriate to the expression of that culture. This need is amplified in the face of a raft of new challenges that would come with an extension, or at least re-orientation, of current international activities into the broader, much more complex and multi-dimensional, multi-disciplinary context of 'global engagement' with its attendant perspectives of sustainability and sustainable development, which emphasize moral/ethical as well as intellectual imperatives.
  - It is strongly felt that there is a need for the scholarship inherent in international activity to be appreciated much more widely at MSU, both within academic departments and across the College itself, and for the development of faculty incentives that reflect this appreciation. Again this is especially so with respect to any reorientation towards 'global engagement' which, with its emphasis on the multi-faceted, 'holistic' complexities of 'whole of globe' issues, will certainly demand new multi-disciplinary and inter-disciplinary scholarship and practices, as well as new, cross departmental and even cross college academic organization, that both reflect and respond to this multi-dimensionality.

- The external challenges to the current work, in addition to the consequences of the reorientation of its priorities by USAID, include increased competition for projects and funds alike from other universities as well as from other development and consulting agencies. As judged by a number of emerging international programs in agriculture and natural resources in which US universities are involved, Michigan State University is frequently not the 'most preferred institution' - nor even the first port of call. It is strongly felt that MSU (and CANR in particular) will need to significantly change (reform and transform) its systems and structures ways as well as its dispositions if it is ever to stake a realistic claim as being the premier land grant university with regard to global engagement.
- Many challenges to both current as well as potential initiatives in international activities/global engagements internal to the university and CANR itself, also surfaced frequently, and with remarkable consistency, during the conversations. These included, but were not limited to:
  - An all too common antipathy towards or at least lack of commitment to, international activities including development, educational and research activities and even to study-abroad programs, by faculty and department chairs alike.
  - A lack of incentive for the involvement of faculty in such initiatives, even where enthusiasm to engage was evident.
  - A dearth of scholarly forums within the College on development issues and especially on the implications of a re-orientation to 'global engagement'.
  - The lack of clear motivations, strategic priorities, and directions for an integrated College-wide approach to international activities/global engagement, as illustrated by the lack of a coherent strategic plan for the domain.
  - A prevailing lack of appreciation of (or acceptance of responsibility for) connections between local and global - positive, in the sense of dual trading benefits to Michigan as well as to overseas countries, to faculty development, to student education, to collaborative research etc, as well as negative from the point of view of local impacts on global environmental phenomenon etc.
  - Frustrations at what are seen as decisions with respect to 'global engagement' being made by senior administrators without consultation with experienced faculty, and with apparent disregard to the strengths and comparative advantages that have been endowed to CANR by past and current initiatives in international activities.
- It would not be overstating the case to argue that many of the current initiatives in international activities conducted by CANR faculty are at considerable risk, and for a variety of reasons. It is strongly felt that the issues associated with this

situation need to be urgently addressed before any fresh initiatives are launched in the name of 'global engagement'.

- That stated, there is considerable enthusiasm for, and commitment to, on-going strategic conversations across the CANR that focus on the development of a culture of international/global orientations that will lead in turn to the articulation of coherent strategic directions that are relevant to emerging global conditions and that are both desirable and feasible to implement.

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January 2007