

## **Setting up an International Office: Lessons Learned**

19 June 2009

Joel Harrington, *Associate Provost for Global Strategy, Vanderbilt University*  
Dawn Turton, *Executive Director, Vanderbilt International Office*

### **I. Overview**

The Vanderbilt International Office (VIO) was launched in October 2006 with a mission to facilitate individual and institutional connections between Vanderbilt faculty, researchers, staff, students, alumni and the larger world. Since that time VIO has grown significantly but not without experiencing some growing pains along the way. Many of the challenges faced by Vanderbilt in setting up an international office are common to many institutions. These challenges include:

1. How to deal with a variety of academic stakeholders: Vanderbilt University has ten schools, including a large medical school with a significant international presence. As with other universities, all these schools have their own established procedures for dealing with international issues such as setting up overseas study opportunities to bringing in visiting scholars.
2. The challenge of dealing with a large number of offices on campus with “international” as part of their title and/or mission and a variety of reporting structures.
3. The problem of an evolving mandate on internationalization as the institution underwent a change in Chancellor and Provost.
4. The diverse practices and lack of communication between academic and supporting units on campus such as International Tax, the Office of the General Counsel, and Sponsored Research.

We intend this brief overview of our experiences as part of a work in progress, sharing those hard-earned nuggets of wisdom we have unearthed along the way. We are very grateful for all of the similar experiences and advice shared by colleagues following our presentation at the February 2009 conference.

### **II. Creating an Office, 2001-2006 (JH)**

In Fall 2001, Vanderbilt’s provost created a faculty committee to devise an international strategy for the university. This represented the first attempt at a holistic approach to the myriad international research and student programs already underway. One of the outcomes of the committee’s final report, submitted the next year, was the creation of an Assistant Provost for International Affairs to spearhead the internationalization effort in Fall 2004. It took another year to formulate a more extensive international strategy for Vanderbilt and still another year to implement one of that report’s key recommendations: the creation of a university-wide international office to drive the academic internationalization process.

### **Lessons Learned**

➤ *You can’t have too many allies.* Support at the top is key to the success of any internationalization effort. In our case, we had the early support of the chancellor and provost, but I also worked very hard to involve all of the deans as well as key faculty champions as soon as possible. One mechanism for this was the creation of the

Advisory Council for International Affairs (ACIA), composed of faculty representatives from each of the ten Schools (selected in concert with the respective deans) as well as leaders from the various international offices around campus. We spent much of the year before the creation of VIO building a consensus on the need for an international strategy and international office in the first place. I also spent a lot of time meeting with several individual faculty members throughout the university on a “listening tour.” The office could never have been created without the support of the administration but neither would it have had much of a chance at survival, let alone success, without laying this foundation.

➤ *A clear but flexible strategic plan is indispensable.* I had the great luxury, as Assistant Provost, of starting with a broad-based committee report and reformulating and expanding it as a sole author. Obviously there are pros and cons to each approach but in this way we were able to start from the basis of greatest consensus and move to several very specific strategic suggestions (37 in total) to implement change. It has been essential that this second report and set of recommendations were always treated as guidelines, rather than blueprints, which was the only sensible way to proceed given the huge gaps in my own knowledge of the university and international education in general (I had never even heard of NAFSA or AIEA) as well several unforeseeable challenges and opportunities.

➤ *Supporting change in principle does not always translate into supporting change in practice.* Institutional inertia is a fact of life at all universities and ours was no different, particularly once some turf issues emerged. In these instances, the strong support of the provost and the deans was essential, even though their understanding of specific issues was necessarily incomplete. Constant reiteration of the need for a coordinated approach (which includes underscoring existing and potential problems) is an essential part of maintaining this crucial administrative support of important organizational changes. This does not mean, obviously, that you will always get everything that you want but it does promise a greater likelihood of success in most areas. Again, social capital with faculty colleagues and the deans is indispensable.

➤ *Leverage your assets and seize your opportunities.* We built the VIO incrementally over the course of two years, starting with one part-time assistant provost, later adding an administrative assistant, later a program assistant, and in the fall of 2006, leveraged the modest accomplishments to date with an opportunity to swap my highly desired office space for a much larger suite in an older building, at which point we pronounced the Vanderbilt International Office created, marked with a large reception hosted by the chancellor. The same incremental growth was the case in budget, as over the course of twelve months we moved two existing offices (the English Language Center and Study Abroad) to my oversight. Administrative support for the strategic report in general, in other words, took some time to sink into practice and the foundation for VIO was laid by several small (and increasingly larger) successes with faculty members, and thereby gaining the confidence of the deans, and consequently the provost, as much as the other way around.

### **III. Building a Team**

VIO has grown since 2004 and in addition to the Associate Provost for Global Strategy the office now has an Executive Director, three Program Coordinators and two graduate assistants. The positions were created as the responsibilities of VIO evolved. This evolution took time as we

worked to define our mission on campus particularly in relation to the other campus offices that were involved in international activities. We now focus on three main goals:

1. Support and enhance international faculty collaborations and research;
2. Support and enhance international education of students;
3. Enhance the university's academic reputation abroad.

#### **A. People and Responsibilities (DT)**

New positions were added in VIO as the office gained more visibility. Roles have shifted as new responsibilities were added and the staff has needed to be extremely flexible in learning about new areas such as tax requirements and export control procedures.

##### **Lessons Learned**

- *Create a strong team.* Starting an office from the ground up is a tremendous opportunity to create a well functioning team. As new staff members were added in VIO, we found it was more important to look at how each new person would function as part of the team rather than the individual skills they brought to the office.
- *Share opportunities whenever possible.* Travel is one of the great benefits of working in an international office. Whenever possible, we make sure all VIO staff have an opportunity to participate overseas trips to partner institutions. It is important to the success of the office that everyone feels like an equal part of the team rather than just acting in a minor supporting role.
- *Hire people who can multi-task.* Positions were added only after we could demonstrate that the workload was overwhelming. This means that we are always very busy and juggling multiple projects.

#### **B. Practical Functions (DT)**

##### **1. Increasing Visibility**

After the International Office was launched, we were faced with the task of gaining visibility on campus. We focused our initial efforts on creating a website ([www.vanderbilt.edu/vio](http://www.vanderbilt.edu/vio)) to provide information so our different constituencies could easily locate information relevant to their international projects. In late 2007, we decided to launch a magazine (<http://www.vanderbilt.edu/vio/magazines>) to further highlight the international activities on and off campus. The first edition of "Vanderbilt International" was published in Fall 2008 and featured a wide range of stories including an article on a Physics and Astronomy collaboration with the University of Cape Town, a profile of a Chinese undergraduate student, and a piece on the work of Vanderbilt's Global Health Institute in Mozambique.

Another area in which we have focused our efforts is hosting international delegations. As Vanderbilt's global outreach has increased, the number of visitors to our campus has grown considerably. VIO plays a role in coordinating a wide variety of delegation visits and provides assistance to faculty and departments across campus.

##### **Lessons Learned**

- *Keep it simple.* In its first iteration, the website was a vast resource containing any and all information on international activities at Vanderbilt. In our efforts to reach and include as many people as possible, we cast too wide a net and had hundreds of pages of information that were difficult to navigate. A revised website was launched in 2008 with more streamlined content. A major

achievement was getting a link to the website under “International” on the Vanderbilt homepage. The revised site is also designed using Drupal, which is a free software package that allows content to be easily modified and updated.

- *Be realistic about what you can do.* The magazine has been a great success and we are committed to publishing two editions a year. However it is an incredible amount of work for the VIO staff who write and edit most of the articles. In future budgets, we need to allot additional resources to outsource more of the writing.
- *Learn from others.* The University of Melbourne, one of our core partners, allowed us to visit their international office and learn how they handle groups of visitors. We learned a great deal from them and now have a well structured set of procedures that we follow for each visit. This includes gathering information on the visiting delegation, sending advance briefing materials to them and to their hotel upon arrival, providing talking points for Vanderbilt faculty and post visit follow-up. Creating standard templates for each of stages of a visit has helped immensely in making the time spent here on campus more meaningful for all concerned.

## **2. Developing Institutional Partnerships (JH)**

The Vanderbilt International Strategy of 2005 called for the establishment of "broad and profound institutional partnerships with a small number of peer institutions in strategic locations throughout the world." Since early 2006, the Advisory Council for International Affairs has undertaken to identify a select group of potential core partners for Vanderbilt, focusing on the key criteria of research prominence (world-class strengths in areas similar to Vanderbilt's), disciplinary breadth (at least five counterparts to VU's ten Schools), and strategic location (in terms of geopolitics, economics, and accessibility). A core partnership agreement also requires strong commitment by the partner's academic leadership to devote sufficient financial and other resources to fostering these research collaborations and other cooperation among their students and administrative staff. These expectations necessarily restrict the number of core partnerships that Vanderbilt can reasonably support. On this basis, Vanderbilt has entered into core partnerships with the five institutions over the last three years.

The primary goals of a core partnership are to foster valuable research collaboration, create new educational opportunities for students, and enhance each partner's institutional presence and academic reputation abroad. Research and scholarship form the foundation of the partnerships, therefore, the most prominent and immediate benefits are those for faculty members and students (especially at the graduate or professional level). These benefits include:

1. Financial and logistical support from home and partner institutions in starting or furthering important research collaborations;
2. Access to public and private funding as well as publishing and other scholarly networks in the partner country;
3. Access to governmental and corporate contacts in the partner country and region;
4. More thorough integration of international research teams and labs, particularly in the sciences, through mobility of researchers and students;
5. International publicity for joint research projects.

## **Lessons Learned**

➤ *Building partnerships takes time.* Working with overseas institutions takes a great deal of time and effort on both sides. After the initial meetings and campus visits of both faculty members and administrative leaders, there needs to be consistent follow-up with point persons on both sides of the partnership to ensure that discussions generate results. Many seeds have to be planted and nourished and not all will take root and grow. Some will prosper and expand; others may bloom quickly and then wither. To complete the overdrawn gardening metaphor, both individual research collaborations and institutional partnerships are intrinsically dynamic and require constant attention, planning, and adaptation to the changing environment. You need some short-term successes for all concerned but truly enduring institutional relationships are not built overnight.

➤ *It is important to have a plan for what each partner wants to accomplish.* Every university has multiple international partnerships of varying scope and depth so it is very important to be clear and realistic about expectations on both sides for this particular relationship, in terms of student and faculty mobility, joint research (including joint publications and joint grant applications). How will such projects be funded and publicized? Who will be the key contacts on each side? As the number of individual faculty collaborations with each core partner has grown, we have moved more towards medium- and long-term planning for the institutional partnership and support framework.

➤ *You need champions in the faculty and administration.* We have intentionally founded our strategic partnership approach on faculty participation and research rather than student exchanges, since we consider the former a more sustainable model for the long-term. That said, it is much more time-consuming to set up and build and requires identifying key faculty champions in each school and department when possible. We have also worked with our deans to designate one associate dean in each of their offices to be the point person for all international issues, including faculty research projects and core partnerships.

## **2. VIO Grants Program (DT & JH)**

Vanderbilt had a significant number of international research collaborations in progress prior to the establishment of VIO. The goal of our office was to increase the number and breadth of these collaborations and focus some of our resources in key areas such as the core partnerships. To support faculty efforts VIO created a new seed grant program with three main objectives:

1. to enhance the research and teaching programs at Vanderbilt by providing seed funding to establish selective international research collaborations and exchanges;
2. to promote the academic reputation of Vanderbilt outside the U.S. and to enhance recruitment of international faculty and students;
3. to build sustainable institutional partnerships with peer institutions overseas.

The research grants fall into two main categories - Exploratory Grants and Project Development Grants. Exploratory Grants are intended to support individuals or small groups of researchers to develop new research collaborations with foreign partners. Project Development Grants are intended to lay the foundation for an ongoing and sustainable research partnership that includes mobility of faculty, staff, and students between the two institutions.

In 2009, VIO created a new grants category for international curricular development. Grants are awarded at the departmental level to teams of at least three faculty members and priority is given to departments that have traditionally had fewer courses with a global focus. The new grants provide funding for faculty to add an international component to an existing or new course. This allows VIO to make an investment on campus that has an impact on the internationalization of the university but does not necessarily require international travel. Additionally, the grants impact our undergraduate population in a more concrete way than the research grant categories.

### **Lessons Learned**

- *A little money goes a long way.* The VIO grants are intended as seed grants to initiate collaborations and are for relatively small amounts of money. Many faculty members who have received funds have gone on to successfully apply for external awards after their projects have become more developed.
- *Reach out to as many faculty members as possible.* The number of applicants for the VIO grants program has grown significantly over the last two years. This growth can be attributed to VIO's outreach efforts, particularly in the humanities and social sciences, which often conceive of research collaborations differently. VIO staff actively promote the grants at every opportunity, send targeted e-mails to potential applicants, and give feedback on grant proposals. We also attend departmental meetings to explain the application process and highlight successes.

### **3. Developing Student Programs (DT)**

VIO has been involved in several initiatives including integrating study abroad opportunities into the curricula and increasing the number of exchange programs. In 2006, VIO spearheaded the creation of the Vanderbilt Initiative for Scholarship and Global Engagement (VISAGE) as a means to engage students in international service learning and reflection. A university committee spent two years researching and planning the program and it was launched in 2008.

VISAGE is a three-module experiential learning program that combines international study and civic engagement with scholarship and service opportunities abroad. Students explore topics of global significance through a year-long learning sequence beginning in January with a core course at Vanderbilt, followed by summer service or field-based project abroad, and a research intensive seminar in the fall semester.

### **Lessons Learned**

- *Don't hide your light under a bushel.* VISAGE received two awards in 2009. The Institute of International Education recognized the program under the Study Abroad category and NASPA awarded it a Bronze Excellence Award. The awards have helped VISAGE gain visibility on campus among students, faculty and administrators which helps when making the case for allocating resources to the program. We have also made use of our own website, publications, and the services of our Division of News and Public Affairs so that these and other VIO successes are well-known.
- *Make use of existing networks.* Most of the VISAGE programs are linked to ongoing overseas partnerships that Vanderbilt has created. This allows the programs to be sustainable and allows the students to have a stronger impact on the communities in which they work. Similarly we are focusing our student exchanges on overseas institutions where we have existing research partnerships and faculty engagement.

#### **4. Policies and Procedures (DT)**

A major focus for VIO has been the streamlining and standardization of a variety of procedural and legal issues including international agreements, procedures for visiting international faculty, study abroad risk assessment, and export control.

*The Study Abroad Risk Assessment Committee (SARAC)* was created in 2007 to review all study and service abroad programs involving students when there are significant health or safety concerns. These concerns include but are not limited to U.S. State Department travel warnings, travel warnings from governmental health organizations, natural disasters, and on-site reports. Prior approval of the Committee is required for any education abroad opportunity involving travel by Vanderbilt students to a location subject to a travel warning from the State Department. The Committee is also responsible for deciding whether to suspend an education abroad opportunity when health or safety concerns emerge shortly before a program starts or while it is in progress. SARAC is chaired by the Associate Provost for Global Strategy and its members include the General Counsel, the Vice-Chancellor for Public Affairs, the Assistant Vice Chancellor for Risk and Insurance Management, and the Director of the Institute for Global Health.

*The International Policies and Procedures Committee (IPPC)* was created in 2008 to look at how international activities are handled at Vanderbilt and to make recommendations about how procedures could be streamlined. Several areas were addressed by the IPPC including how to initiate overseas partnerships and how to effectively keep track of Vanderbilt's growing number of international activities.

#### **Lessons Learned**

- *Create a committee with high-credibility.* On both SARAC and the IPPC, we have representatives from both the university central and medical sides of campus. These representatives are all in key positions, are familiar first-hand with the most pressing problems, and are able to influence the decisions being made on campus.
- *Limit the size of committees.* We have had instances when committees have become too large and unwieldy due to our goal of including a wide variety of perspectives. It is important to evaluate the work of any group over time and decide if it is useful to the overall strategic mission.

#### **IV. Ongoing and New Challenges (JH & DT)**

The Vanderbilt International office has now been in existence for three years. Many of the initial goals that we set have been accomplished and we are in the process of assessing our current efforts as well as planning for our next steps. A constant theme in our day-to-day activities involves prioritizing objectives and reassessing them on a regular basis. We, like most colleagues at other institutions, are also struggling with ways to better centralize information about faculty research projects, travel abroad, international grant applications, etc. Finally, it is always a difficult balancing act with faculty members to assist and enable in various ways without making them overly reliant or dependent, especially given our limited human resources.

Over the next year we will focus our efforts on developing additional research, teaching and administrative ties with our partner institutions and encouraging greater internationalization efforts on campus through curricula development, student and scholar exchanges and increased study abroad opportunities. We also plan to work more closely with personnel in development to reach out to international alumni and strengthen our networks overseas.