HOW UNIVERSITIES IN TRANSITION COUNTRIES CAN BECOME MORE INTEGRATED IN THE GLOBAL ACADEMIC COMMUNITY

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Abstract

In the spring semester of 2005 fifteen visiting scholars from the former Soviet Union and the former Yugoslavia conducted a Participatory Strategic Planning (PSP) exercise at The George Washington University. We also included by email over a hundred observers and participants around the world. Through the PSP exercise we demonstrated the group facilitation methods called the Technology of Participation and developed plans to guide the home universities of the participants toward more interaction with other universities at home and abroad. The results suggest several actions to work on in the coming years: improve interuniversity contacts, find new sources of financing, promote faculty self-development, increase faculty oversight of the university administration, improve university infrastructure, and strengthen academic publishing.

Key words: global network of universities, participation, strategic planning, group facilitation, transition economies.

Introduction

Universities in the former Soviet Union and the former Yugoslavia are rather well developed. They have good facilities, experienced faculty, and a tradition of excellence in education. However, these universities are currently not well integrated in the global network of universities. The transition period that started in the economy in the early 1990s is now passing through academia. There are ongoing changes in the system of higher education in these countries. These changes are motivated in part by the transition toward a market economy, which requires changes in employee skills and in education. Some of the trends causing change in higher education in all countries were explained in an earlier paper. (Prytula, *et al.*, 2004)

Method

To understand the changes our universities are facing and to increase our ability to help our universities make the needed changes, we conducted a Participatory Strategic Planning (PSP) activity from January to March 2005. Two groups of people were involved in the weekly sessions. The first, 'face-to-face' group consisted of fifteen visiting scholars from the countries of the former Soviet Union and the former Yugoslavia together with a few George Washington University (GWU) faculty members. The second, 'distance' group consisted of 91 Junior Faculty Development Program (JFDP) scholars then in the U.S. and about 100 alumni of the JFDP program at GWU.

Participatory Strategic Planning (PSP) is part of the Technology of Participation, a set of group facilitation methods developed by the Institute of Cultural Affairs (Umpleby, *et al.,* 2003). These methods can be used with any group of people who share a common interest. A facilitated problem-solving or planning activity involves people in identifying problems as they see them and in devising solutions that they believe will work (Umpleby, 1994).

We had five group discussions on the following topics:
1. "The Focus Question," the point of reference for all subsequent discussions.
2. "Practical Vision," a picture of the desired future in five to ten years.
3. "Underlying Contradictions," the obstacles preventing realization of the vision.
4. "Strategic Directions," strategies for removing the obstacles to achieving the vision.
5. "Implementation Timeline," the schedule of actions needed to carry out the strategies. (See Figure 1)

Each step of the PSP process uses the "Consensus Workshop" method. This method involves five steps:
1. Context -- The facilitator provides background on the method and task.
2. Brainstorm -- The participants write their ideas on cards.
3. Cluster -- The facilitator and participants group the cards according to similar ideas.
4. Name -- The key idea in each cluster is identified.
5. Resolve -- The facilitator asks if the ideas generated are complete and represent a good description. (See Figure 2)

The Participatory Strategic Planning exercise began with an introductory conversation among the participants. The goal of our first session was to define a Focus Question to provide direction to the planning process. The focus question that emerged from our conversation was, "How can JFDP fellows (and others) cooperate to make our universities more integrated in the global academic community?" (See Figure 3.) The second session was dedicated to defining a vision. (See Figure 4.) The focus of the third session was finding the contradictions or obstacles impeding progress toward the vision. (See Figure 5.) The fourth step was to define strategies to remove the obstacles to achieving the vision. (See Figure 6.) In the last step we created an "implementation timeline." (See Figure 7.) We defined four quarters in the year 2005. During the first two quarters the participants were still at universities in the U.S. In the second two quarters they were at their home universities. So in the first two quarters the participants would do research and prepare. In the second two quarters they would implement the plans at their home universities.

Use of a 'distance' group

Compared to last year's Participatory Strategic Planning exercise (Prytula, *et al.*, 2004) we received only a few suggestions from our alumni. We found that holding meetings each week rather than every two weeks provided less time for communication with alumni. There were about two suggestions for each step from people outside Washington. Nevertheless, several people who did not send suggestions said that they found the exercise interesting and thought-provoking and thanked us for including them in the process. These comments indicate that a Participatory Strategic Planning exercise that

seeks to involve other participants via email can, without much trouble, have a positive effect beyond the immediate group.

Conclusions

The benefits of group facilitation methods, as noted by Rosabeth Moss Kanter are:
1. The specific plans themselves – strategies, solutions, action plans;
2. Greater commitment – ability to implement decisions and strategies;
3. More innovation – a larger portfolio of ideas;
4. A common framework for decision making, communication, planning, and problem solving;
5. Encouragement of initiative and responsibility. (Spencer, 1989)

Participatory Strategic Planning experiences can help universities improve their performance and become more involved with other universities both at home and abroad. These methods can be particularly helpful for universities in transitional societies, since they emphasize participation and data-driven decision-making. Consequently, they stimulate local initiative and improve accountability.

Acknowledgement

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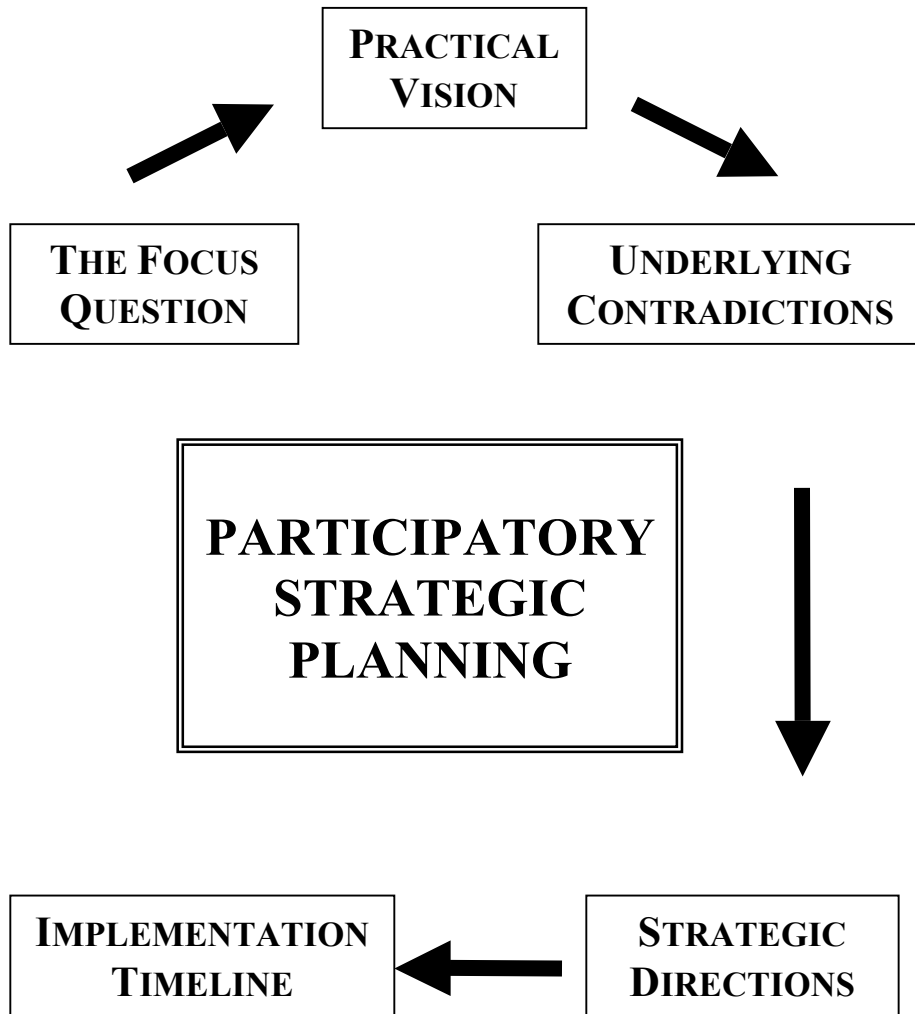**Figure 1**

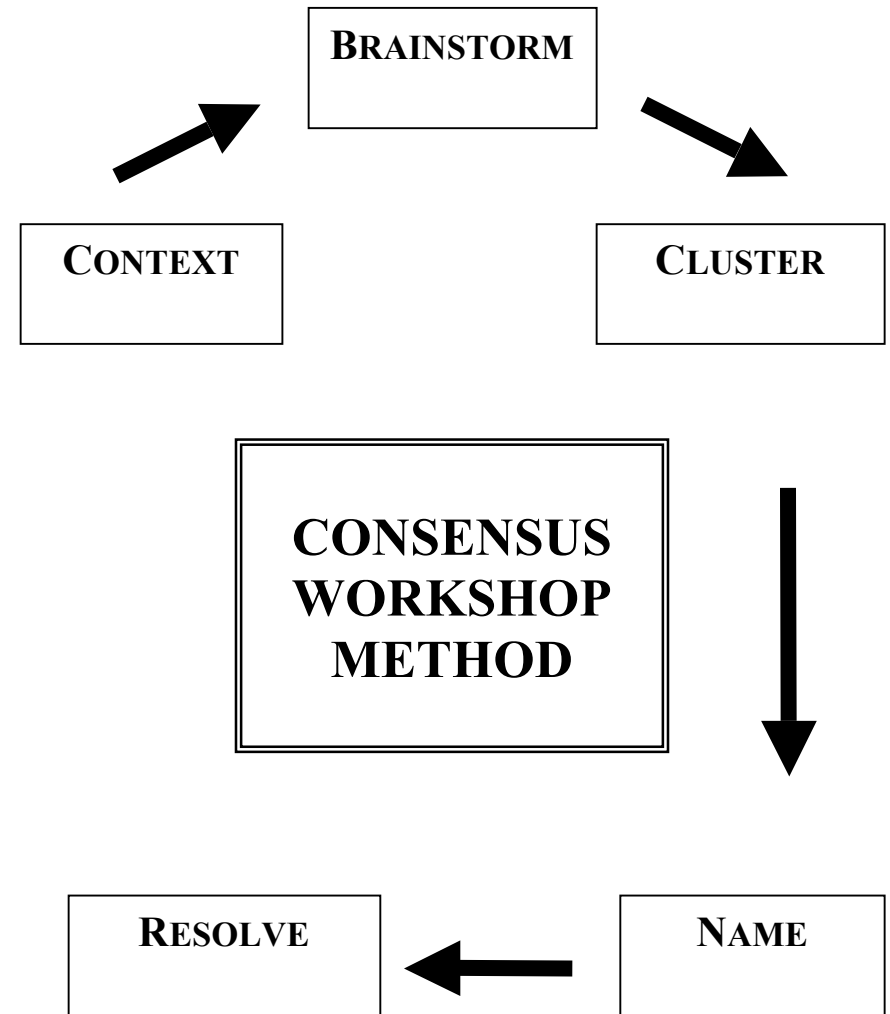PRACTICAL VISION

THE FOCUS QUESTION

UNDERLYING CONTRADICTIONS

PARTICIPATORY STRATEGIC PLANNING

IMPLEMENTATION TIMELINE

STRATEGIC DIRECTIONS

Figure 2

BRAINSTORM

CONTEXT

CLUSTER

CONSENSUS WORKSHOP METHOD

RESOLVE

NAME

Figure 3. FOCUS QUESTION:

1. SUBJECT
- Students
- Faculty
- Services
- Departments
- Quality
- Research

2. RATIONAL OBJECTIVE
- Work on lifelong learning
- Improve education of Professors
- Find out what colleagues think about virtual education
- Decide what we can do to change things
- Formulate research projects
- Improve research methods and practice
- Work to develop accrediting organization

How can JFDP fellows (and others) cooperate to make our universities more integrated in the global academic community?

3. PARTICIPANTS
- GW JFDP group
- JFDP alumni via email
- JFDP mentors at GWU
- American Councils staff
- GW Faculty
- State Department staff

4. STAKEHOLDERS
- Local companies
- International companies
- Journalists, public groups
- Government agencies & officials
- Students and their parents
- Colleagues at home universities

4. EXPERIENTIAL OBJECTIVE
- Private universities (survive in the market)
- Public universities (deliver a public service)

4. TIME FRAME
- 4 years (1 student generation)
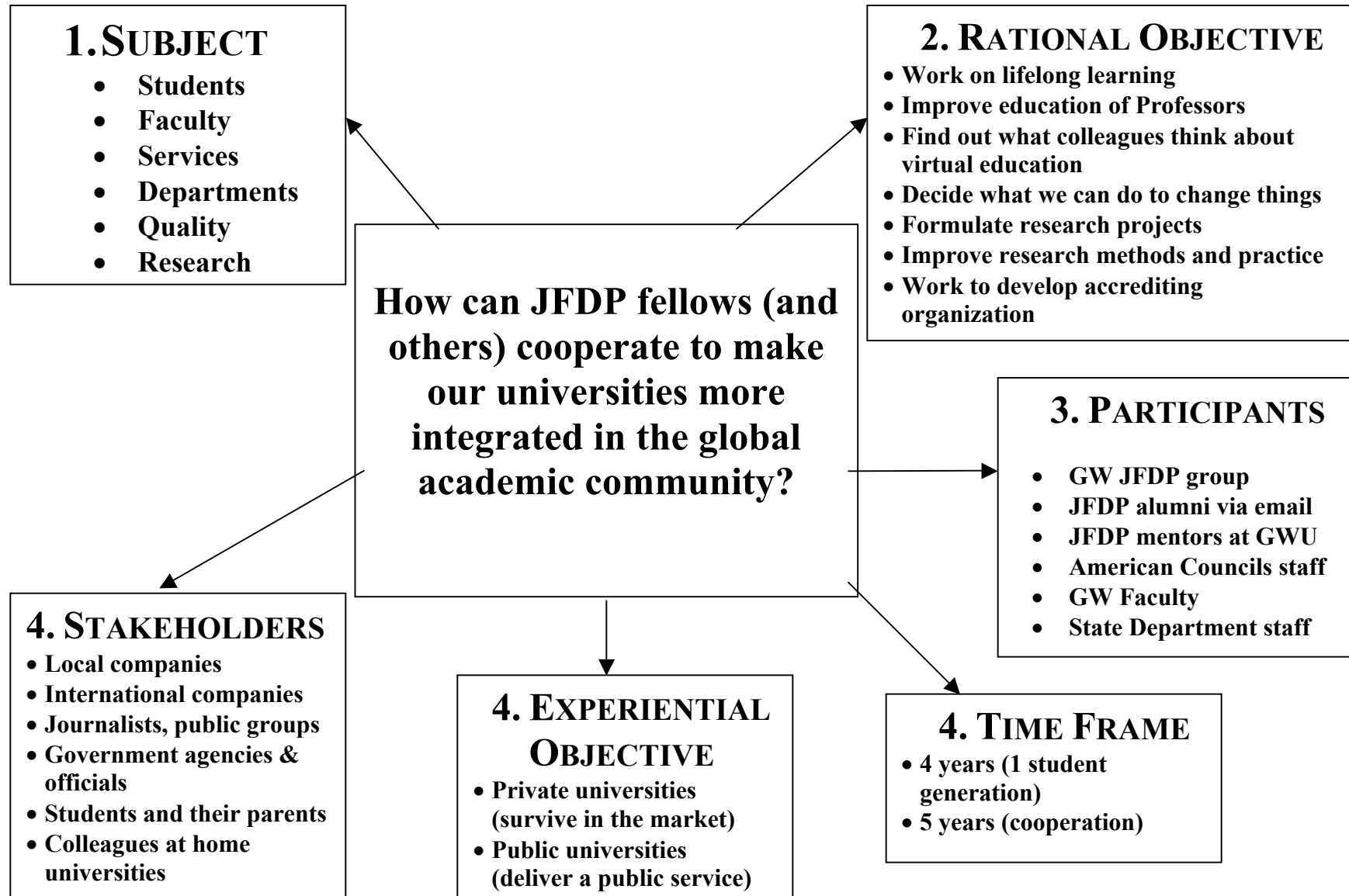- 5 years (cooperation)

Figure 4. PRACTICAL VISION

FOCUS QUESTION: "How can JFDP fellows (and others) cooperate to make our universities more integrated in the global academic community?"

PRACTICAL VISION QUESTION: What do we what to see in place over the next 3-5 years?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
HIGH QUALITY, WORLD RECOGNIZED PROGRAMS	EMAIL LISTS AND LISTSERVES	COOPERA-TIVE PROGRAMS	EXPANDED FUND RAISING	COOPERA-TION IN TEACHING	COOPERATION ON PUBLICATIONS AND RESEARCH	ANNUAL PARTICIPATORY STRATEGIC PLANNING MEETINGS	A MORE PROGRESSIVE MENTALITY AMONG PROFESSORS	A WELL-DEVELOPED ACCREDITA-TION SYSTEM
Success of former students (graduates), as prominent political figures, etc.	Frequent email invitations to local conferences and forums	Cooperation agreements between universities	Professional endowment specialists (are) employed on campus	Exchanges of curricula and textbooks	Cooperation in publishing articles in each other's academic journals	Organizing an event for high ranking university officials to discuss academic issues	Parallel network within the University (JFDP alumni to work as a separate body at the university)	New accrediting organizations
Maintaining the skills of professors and students through exchanges	Answering emails within 24 hours	Exchange programs for professors and students	Many universities have an Office of Research Support to help professors get grants	Distance learning courses being offered to our students and others	Research work between JFDP alumni and their Mentors	Regular participatory planning events in departments and schools	More similar perceptions among young and old professors	
International students from developed countries on our campuses	Informing each other about publications	Projects involving more than one university	Higher tuition to bring in more money for faculty salaries	Distance learning courses offered by our professors	Research among JFDP fellows in the same fields of study		Involvement of older generation of professors in our meetings, to maintain their support	
Our business schools ranked among other business schools in the world	Networks among JFDP fellows' home institutions to cooperate on conferences and projects	Conferences (and projects) organized by two or more universities	Participation in various grant receiving programs		Publications in internationally recognized journals and participation in international conferences		Reduced tension between young and old professors	
Quality improvement methods are being used on many campuses					Joint publications of JFDP participants in overlapping fields		More openness to new ideas	
Visiting professors are on campus					References to each other in publications			
World recognition of our professors								

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Figure 5. UNDERLYING CONTRADICTIONS

FOCUS QUESTION: "How can JFDP fellows (and others) cooperate to make our universities more integrated in the global academic community?"

CONTRADICTIONS QUESTION: "What are the contradictions that are preventing us from reaching our vision?"

Insufficient language skills	Lack of interdisciplinary theories	Unreliable, undeveloped infrastructure	Insufficient information and oversight	Low quality of academic research	A closed mind to cooperation	Political situation does not support cooperation	Government interferes in Education	Fiscal mismanagement
Some leading professors do not know English	Different academic fields impede collaboration	Electricity sometimes does not work	Insufficient faculty review of how university money is spent	Different levels of capacity (university, professors)	Unwillingness to cooperate within and among universities (no perceived benefit)	Political situation prevents desire to cooperate	In some countries the government requires courses in "State Ideology"	Free tuition at some universities reduces willingness to pay tuition
		Insufficient access to PCs and the internet	Insufficient measures of faculty performance	Focus on local not global social and administrative systems	Don't see a benefit in cooperation	Few incentives for universities to improve education	Government policy restrains educational innovation	Low tuition reduces pressure from students for quality education
		Some classrooms do not have blackboards or overhead projectors	Insufficient accreditation oversight	Lack of qualification (skills and recognition) of young and progressive professors	Not interested (no incentive)	Demand for education exceeds supply	Government prescribes content of courses	University takes a large percentage of revenue for general administration
		No PCs in many faculty offices	No tradition of faculty governance	Businessmen do not request and fund academic research	First time (a little scared)	Many more students than positions in universities	In some countries the government controls the evaluation system for students	Not enough tuition is being paid
		Insufficient knowledge of resources available on the internet		Few contacts with local businesses that could contribute money/equipment	Focus is on the basics of earning income		Many approvals necessary in order to publish an article (bureaucracy)	The business model is unclear and does not stimulate revenue generation
				No time for research	Innovation inertia		Little competition among universities	Low salaries of professors
							Few private universities	

Figure 6. STRATEGIC DIRECTIONS

FOCUS QUESTION: "How can JFDP fellows (and others) cooperate to make our universities more integrated in the global academic community?"

STRATEGIC DIRECTION QUESTION: "What innovative strategies will deal with the contradictions and move us toward our vision?"

Improve inter-university contacts	Find new sources of financing	Promote faculty self-development	Increase faculty oversight of university administration	Improve university infrastructure	Strengthen academic publishing	Support academic freedom
Increase participation in partnership programs	Search for sponsors of research programs	Encourage faculty members to develop themselves	Give faculty more independence in decision making	Improve office equipment (PCs, internet, phones, fax, copiers)	Create journals with double blind review processes	Privatize some state institutions
Create special centers for international collaboration	Increase contacts with local business people	Improve the reward system for international collaboration	Give more decision making power to the universities rather than government	Improve classroom equipment (blackboards, overhead projectors, PC projectors)	Allow students to publish in academic journals	Flow with the current political situation rather opposing state policies (Try to benefit from the current political situation)
Create office to manage international contacts	Get requests from business to do research	Create a faster promotion system for capable faculty members	Increase faculty involvement in the budget process			
Create inter-university research teams/networks	Establish a university endowment	Improve language skills of faculty and students				
	Get support from alumni					

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Figure 7. IMPLEMENTATION TIMELINE

FOCUS QUESTION: "How can JFDP fellows (and others) cooperate to make our universities more integrated in the global academic community?"

IMPLEMENTATION TIMELINE QUESTION: "What will we do during the first year?"

Strategic Directions	1ST QUARTER	2ND QUARTER	3RD QUARTER	4TH QUARTER
1. Improve interuniversity contacts	a) Email announcements/ invitations b) Exchange email with home university Presidents to encourage creating a consultant position for writing grant proposals	a) Write a grant proposal for research at home university. Discuss it with grant-makers in DC b) Begin preparing an international conference for 2006 – 2007	Establish a JFDP Alumni network in home university, city and region	Finish and submit a grant proposal
2. Find new sources of financing			a) Start a seminar series to respond to the needs of local academic and business people b) Talk with the dean and the chairman of the local business association about creating a business research center on campus c) Talk face-to-face with home university President to create a consultant position for writing grant proposals d) For grant writing build an alumni group who share common interests and personal relations	
3. Promote faculty self-development			Give a lecture series on preparing grant applications and writing resumes and cover letters	Establish a free-of-charge English class
4. Increase faculty oversight of university administration			At home universities hold a faculty retreat focused on oversight	a) Call a weekly faculty meeting (involve both old and young faculty) b) Consider splitting off schools from universities
5. Improve University infrastructure			a) Create an agreement with businesses to teach their employees about computers b) Encourage faculty proposals for improving infrastructure	Teach a free-of-charge basic computer class through IREX
6. Strengthen academic publishing			a) Talk to University editor-in-chief to consider articles from abroad b) Reprint and/or translate foreign articles at home universities	