

# A Process for Screening and Authorizing Joint and Double Degree Programs

Report prepared by:  
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May 2013



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# **A Process for Screening and Authorizing Joint and Double Degree Programs**

**A Briefing Paper from IIE's Center for International Partnerships**

**Institute of International Education**

**May 2013**

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## Introduction

With the current focus on strategic internationalization and institutional partnerships, joint and double degree programs are becoming increasingly attractive to higher education institutions around the world. Recent surveys show that these programs support the strategic intent of many institutions by permitting them to attract international students, strengthen academic research quality, increase international visibility and prestige, and increase revenue, among other motivating factors<sup>1</sup>.

But joint and double degree programs also are more complex to implement than most traditional degree programs. Being different and new, they are often poorly understood. And perhaps more importantly, they can be polarizing: double degrees, in particular, offer an easy target for critics because of the possible double counting of credits.

Regardless of one's position on the matter, the fact is that these programs are increasingly popular, and sooner or later most institutions will come across proposals from their faculty to implement such a program. Being prepared to properly assess and evaluate their merits is important and will support successful implementation and sustainability.

Because joint and double degree programs are so different from traditional degree programs, we at Rice University believe that they warrant a special screening process. This came to light as we considered our first such program in 2012: a double Ph.D. with the Universidade Estadual de Campinas in Brazil. While preparing to develop [a proposal](#) for the program, we realized that faculty might be ill-prepared to consider and address all the complications that joint and double degrees can introduce. As a result, we developed a formal screening and authorization process to help the program sponsor describe it and help the University evaluate it. While the process is barely a year old, and Rice University only has a single double or joint degree program to date, we have already used the screening process extensively.

This paper describes Rice University's process for evaluating potential new joint and double degree programs and summarizes the lessons we learned as we developed this screening process.

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<sup>1</sup> Recent survey reports include: "Joint Degrees, Dual Degrees, and International Research Collaborations," Council of Graduate Schools, 2010; and "Joint and Double Degree Programs in the Global Context," Institute of International Education, 2011.

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## Designing a Screening Process for Joint and Double Degree Programs

Dealing with joint and double degree programs requires first to use these terms consistently. In that sense, Rice University adopted the Council of Graduate Schools' definitions<sup>2</sup>:

**Dual (or double) degree:** students receive a separate diploma from each of the participating institutions.

**Joint degree:** students receive a single diploma representing work completed at two or more institutions.

Thinking about screening proposals for these collaborative degree programs, we wanted a process that could meet multiple and apparently mutually exclusive objectives. Chief among those were:

- Ensuring that all important factors had been considered
- Increasing the strategic alignment of individual initiatives with Rice's priorities
- Maintaining shared governance
- Reducing unnecessary work in the proposal-writing phase
- Increasing buy-in across campus
- Reducing setup time of the program

As a result, we developed a tailored screening process. The table below summarizes our initial objectives for the screening process and how our approach supports them.

**Table 1: Screening Process for Joint and Double Degree Programs: Objectives and Approach**

OBJECTIVE	APPROACH
Ensure that all important factors had been considered	Provide an exhaustive list of questions to be answered by the applicant and assistance for them to answer those.
Increase strategic alignment of initiatives	Engage both central administration and the faculty in designing the screening process.  Invite both central administration and the relevant school(s) to be part of the screening committee of each individual proposal.  Ensure that, during the screening process, the relevant dean(s) and others commit the needed resources to projects that they support.
Maintain shared governance	Ensure that the faculty senate has final say on individual proposals.  Ensure that central administration and the faculty have several points of contact to share their opinions on individual proposals.
Reduce unnecessary work	Use a two-step process with a relatively quick pre-proposal step to ensure that the applicant obtain feedback early.

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<sup>2</sup> "Joint Degrees, Dual Degrees, and International Research Collaborations," Council of Graduate Schools, 2010, p.35.

Increase buy-in across campus	Ensure a wide representation in the decision-making process.
Reduce setup time	Use a two-step process that opens a fast track for those pre-proposals that receive a high level of enthusiasm during pre-screening. Ensure that proposals that receive a high level of enthusiasm also receive resource commitments during the pre-screening process.

At Rice University, a proposal for a traditional graduate program is a document presented to the Graduate Council and the Faculty Senate that addresses specific, but broad, themes. For screening joint and double degree programs, we adopted a more rigorous process: a two-step approach with the requirement that the applicant addresses an expanded list of questions.

***Step 1: Preparation of a Pre-Proposal***

The process starts with the preparation of a pre-proposal, a shorter document that answers two overriding questions:

- 1) Is the program intellectually compelling?
- 2) Is it feasible and sustainable?

To answer these questions, the policy guides the applicant through answering a dozen lower-level questions (see Appendix A). However, pre-proposals are limited to a maximum of ten pages to motivate the applicant to not spend too much time designing a program that might eventually not be implemented.

***Step 2: Pre-Proposal Assessment***

Next, the pre-proposal is reviewed by a screening committee. The chair of the Graduate Council or a representative serves on the committee, along with a member of the Faculty Senate. Their participation is important because it provides continuity along the screening process in case the proposal proceeds forward. Other members of the committee include: a representative from the Provost’s Office who provides the viewpoint from the chief academic officer in terms of alignment of the proposal with the academic agenda of the institution; the dean(s) of the school(s) whose department(s) are presenting the proposal, which is useful to gauge the school’s support—both philosophically and resources-wise; and a representative of the Office of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies. Finally, for those proposals involving an international partner, a representative from the President’s International Collaborations and Programs Office is present to evaluate the proposal’s alignment with Rice University’s international objectives.

The pre-screening committee indicates a level of enthusiasm—low, medium or high—and describes the rationale for its evaluation in a written report. The applicant has access to the report and may decide, regardless of the screening committee’s evaluation, to prepare a full proposal.

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This means that the pre-screening committee doesn't have veto power: for example, an applicant whose pre-proposal receives a low level of enthusiasm may still decide to submit a full proposal.

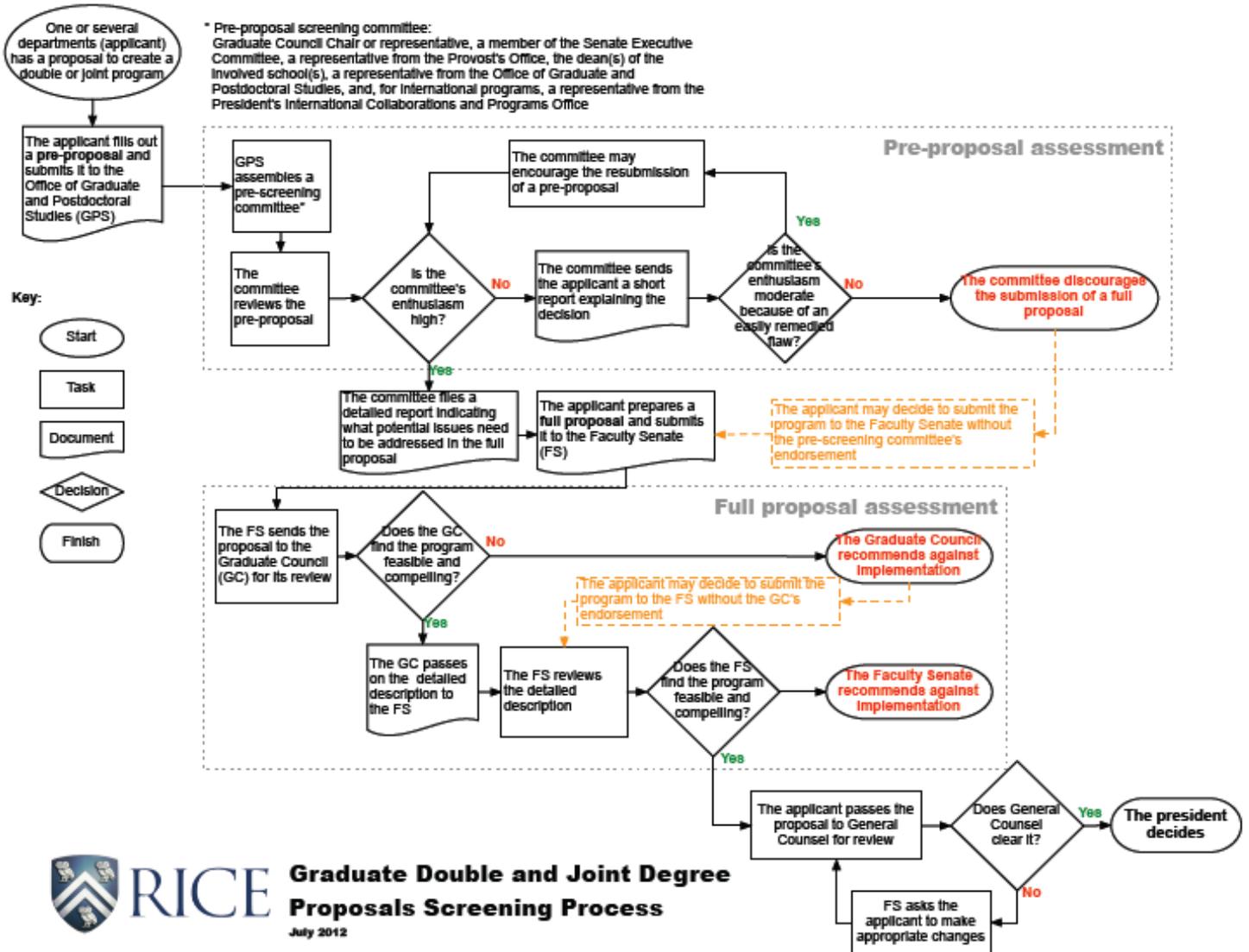
### ***Full Proposal Preparation and Assessment***

If the applicant chooses to proceed, he or she must first prepare a full proposal. The full proposal is a lot more exhaustive than the previous document and various units on campus may need to assist in its preparation, including the Budget Office, the Office of Institutional Effectiveness (to assist with accreditation matters), and the Office of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies.

The full proposal is presented first to the Graduate Council and then to the Faculty Senate, who may both recommend for or against its implementation. It is then reviewed by the General Counsel before being presented to the university president for his decision.

This approach was accepted by the Graduate Council and the Faculty Senate and is now the de facto mechanism for screening proposals for double and joint degree programs at Rice. The flowchart below summarizes the screening process.

Figure 1: Process for screening proposed graduate double and joint degree at Rice University, showing two successive steps.



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## Lessons Learned

Developing this process took over a year, during which we learned valuable lessons. Here are the highlights:

### **1. Don't get stuck at the philosophical level, rather drill into the details.**

Philosophically, one might argue that joint degree programs are better than double degree programs because they don't require any double counting of credits. While this is true, it is also true that setting up a joint degree program with an international partner is considerably more complicated, from an accreditation standpoint. A double degree program is also advantageous if, after a few years, you decide to discontinue the program as your students will have a fallback option. In the end, collaborative degree programs are tools to reach specific goals, and for some goals, one format is better than the other.

### **2. Build a process that supports your objectives.**

The process above works for Rice University, but it doesn't mean that it's the optimal approach for all institutions. The key is to understand which objective(s) you want the screening process to help you achieve and then find a mechanism that works for you. Of particular interest is understanding the current receptiveness for joint and double degree programs at your institution: are you aiming at encouraging your faculty to sponsor such programs or are you looking to provide a framework for deciding fairly amongst too many proposed projects?

### **3. The journey is as important as the result.**

One of the reasons our process ended up being successful is that all major stakeholders were involved from the beginning. In addition, this diversity of opinions resulted in a more thorough vetting process that could have been created if, say, central administration had done it alone.

### **4. Be unbiased.**

Even only raising the possibility that your institution might consider offering joint or double degree programs might generate strong opinions. In our case, we found it essential to dissociate designing a good screening process from evaluating the merit of joint and double degree programs. You should be adamant that creating the process is just setting up a forum where proposals will be fairly evaluated but that each proposal will be evaluated on its own merit; i.e. creating the process doesn't advocate for or against joint or double degree programs.

### **5. Provide an exhaustive list of questions.**

Joint and double degree programs—especially those involving international partners—are complex. Providing applicants with a pre-set list of questions ensures that they will efficiently consider all relevant aspects, regardless of their degree of familiarity with such programs. You are welcome to use [Rice University's list of questions](#) (which can also be found in Appendix A). We used our own research and the description of other programs—such as that of the joint

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PhD program between Georgia Institute of Technology and Peking University<sup>3</sup>—to develop our list of questions.

#### **6. Assist the applicants.**

Building on the previous point, proposals that receive a high level of enthusiasm at the pre-proposal stage are beneficial to the institution and likely to receive further support from other constituencies. Therefore you should help the applicant prepare the full proposal and navigate the screening process successfully. This may mean assisting them with tasks that they might know little about, such as preparing a budget, identifying required resources, or proactively helping them identify potential pitfalls in their program design.

#### **7. Accept the criticisms and engage the critics.**

Because joint and double degree programs are so complex, especially those involving an international partner, they require a thorough vetting process. As an illustration, we received some criticism because our policy for setting up proposals is ten pages long. But we found that engaging critics helped us improve our policy and helped them realize that such exhaustiveness is necessary.

#### **8. Ensure that the various stakeholders have skin in the game.**

Applicants should get help from central administration and others in preparing their proposal, but they should remain in charge of the application. Similarly, support from their schools should be apparent as early as possible. This is easily achievable at the pre-proposal stage, where the school dean sits on the evaluation committee. A supportive dean will commit resources (financial or otherwise), and should be encouraged to do so.

#### **9. Foster conversation around the product.**

People think they might prefer a double degree program to a joint degree program. Or vice versa. But they might not know the implications of choosing either format over a student exchange agreement, a co-advising agreement, or collaboration between research groups. Each of these various formats will help further specific goals and—rather than personal opinion—it is these goals that should dictate which format to adopt. We found that using an analogy was useful to have these conversations: dating (student exchange, collaboration between research groups) should occur before getting engaged (double degree programs or co-advising agreement), which should occur before full-blown marriage (joint degree programs). Following a different sequence might work, but it is riskier.

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<sup>3</sup> [http://www.usg.edu/academic\\_programs/program\\_review/GIT\\_-\\_External\\_Joint\\_PHD\\_Materials\\_SCI\\_w\\_Peking\\_U\\_Forma.pdf](http://www.usg.edu/academic_programs/program_review/GIT_-_External_Joint_PHD_Materials_SCI_w_Peking_U_Forma.pdf), retrieved on February 28, 2013.

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Because joint and double degree programs are different, you should help applicants present their proposals. A standard, explicit process will go a long way towards facilitating conversation. Rice University's process<sup>4</sup> might be useful as an example, but chances are that a process that is right for your institution will come as something different.

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<sup>4</sup> The policy for "Creating Graduate Dual-Degree and Joint-Degree Programs at Rice University" is available for download here: [http://professor.rice.edu/uploadedFiles/Professor/Faculty\\_Senate/rrGCDual-JointGradDegreePolicyApprovedDraftAug21.pdf](http://professor.rice.edu/uploadedFiles/Professor/Faculty_Senate/rrGCDual-JointGradDegreePolicyApprovedDraftAug21.pdf)

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## **Appendix: Rice University’s List of “Possible Questions That Might Be Asked by Review Committees and the Senate”**

These questions are included in Rice University’s proposal guidelines for “Creating Graduate Dual-Degree and Joint-Degree Programs.”

### **1. Rationale:**

- 1.1 Does the program align with Rice’s strategic priorities?
- 1.2 Does the proposed thematic focus enhance Rice initiatives in bioscience and health, energy and the environment, and international strategy?
- 1.3 Does it support increased Rice research capacity and impact?
- 1.4 Does it support other stated goals of Rice’s Mission Statement or the Vision for the Second Century?
- 1.5 Does this program help Rice establish and/or reinforce alliances with other key universities, federal agencies, companies, etc., and if so, why are these alliances important for Rice?
- 1.6 How does the collaboration create a truly excellent program, and does the collaboration achieve excellence and pre-eminence that could not be achieved at Rice alone?

### **2. Curriculum:**

- 2.1 Is it a master’s or doctoral program; is it a thesis or non-thesis program?
- 2.2 Is the program new or an adaptation of an existing Rice program?
- 2.3 Are the changes to or adaptation of the program substantive? If so they can trigger the need for SACS, AACSB, and other accrediting bodies to take a closer look at these programs. (It is important to consider the implications of changes to the curriculum by contacting the Office of Institutional Effectiveness for guidance.)
- 2.4 Which courses will make up the curriculum, and how will they be divided between Rice and the partner institution in terms of requirements and electives?
- 2.5 What is the sequence of courses for a hypothetical student?
- 2.6 What are the languages of instruction?
- 2.7 Does the program confer a dual degree or a joint degree?
- 2.8 Dual degrees usually allow for counting a number of academic credits multiple times, once towards each degree. What proportion of the study plan is eligible for double counting?
- 2.9 If the program confers a dual degree and a thesis is required, does it require one or two theses?
- 2.10 If only one thesis is required, how will the standards be higher than those for a single degree program? A description of how the higher standards will be enforced must be presented, and assurance must be given that, if the thesis is acceptable, both institutions can publish it.
- 2.11 What is the projected duration of the student’s enrollment in the program, and how is it appropriate for the dual or joint degree?
- 2.12 How is the proposed curriculum appropriate for the purpose and goals of the degree(s) awarded?

### **3. Partner Institution:**

- 3.1 Are there any previous formal agreements, joint research projects, or any other significant interactions between Rice faculty/staff and the proposed institutional partner (i.e., strong partnerships have roots in time-tested relationships that have been successful and also overcome conflict and some failures)?
- 3.2 Is establishing the proposed program the best approach to achieve our goal or are there better alternatives, such as establishing or reinforcing student exchange program and establishing or enhancing research collaborations?

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- 3.3 How does this specific partner institution help the proposed program be more than what it would be if offered only by Rice?
  - 3.4 How high is the quality of the partner institution as measured by national and international rankings, personal knowledge of Rice faculty, and other methods?
  - 3.5 Does the partner institution have a comparable or better reputation in the subject area compared to Rice?
  - 3.6 Is the partner program well established?
  - 3.7 Is the partner institution complementary in research strengths and resources?
  - 3.8 Does the partner institution have governing academic and compliance policies that are compatible with Rice policy?
  - 3.9 Are the learning resources (library, laboratories and other university facilities) and student support services of our partner institution comparable to our own?
  - 3.10 How do our partner's students' learning outcomes for this program compare to ours?
  - 3.11 Does our partner have academic program approval processes, including vetting by a faculty group comparable to the Faculty Senate?
  - 3.12 Are the admission policies and standards of our partner similar to ours?
  - 3.13 Does our partner have compatible procedures for the acceptance of academic credit?
  - 3.14 Does our partner have compatible practices for awarding credit?
  - 3.15 Does our partner have consortia relationships and contract agreements that could generate a conflict of interest or other complications?
  - 3.16 Is the number of academic credits necessary to obtain a degree from our partner compatible with ours?
  - 3.17 Are standards for handling student records (confidentiality, reliability, etc.) compatible?
  - 3.18 Is our partner making available to students and the public current academic calendars, grading policies, and refund policies?
  - 3.19 Does our partner have adequate procedures for addressing written student complaints and is it responsible for demonstrating that it follows those procedures when resolving student complaints?

#### **4. Students and Academic Standards:**

- 4.1 Does this program allow Rice to attract a critical mass (at least ten over five years) of world-class students?
- 4.2 What are the projected initial and steady state enrollments?
- 4.3 How does this program help Rice attract world-class graduate students?
- 4.4 Does the program allow students to enhance their research skills in a global context, expand their research networks, access specialized equipment and expertise, and/or enhance "science diplomacy" skills?
- 4.5 How do students get admitted (one admission process or more), and how are the Rice University minimum admission requirements met? A detailed description of the admission process is required from both Rice and the partner institution.
- 4.6 How many advisers will the students have (e.g., one at each institution)?
- 4.7 What are the minimum degree requirements at each institution? (Note that Rice University has minimum standards for graduate degrees—see [http://ga.rice.edu/GR\\_regulations/](http://ga.rice.edu/GR_regulations/))
- 4.8 What are the minimum requirements for good academic standing, the minimum GPA, and the minimum grade in required courses at each institution? (Again, the general Rice policy must be followed: [http://ga.rice.edu/GR\\_degrees/](http://ga.rice.edu/GR_degrees/)).
- 4.9 How will qualifying examinations and annual written reviews of academic progress be administered at Rice and the partner institution?

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4.10 How will the Rice guidelines for "dismissals, petitions, appeals, grievances, and problem resolution for graduate students" (<http://www.graduate.rice.edu/dismissals/>) be enforced?

4.11 What would be the consequences for a student who is in good standing in one institution but not the other?

**5. Learning:** Has the Office of Institutional Effectiveness reviewed and approved the proposal?

**6. Faculty and Courses:** Have all faculty in participating departments voted to approve the proposal?

**7. Resources:** Will there be need for large commitments for new facilities?

**8. Financial Support:**

8.1 What's the potential to attract additional funding (from tuition, federal agencies, or other sources)?

8.2 Does the program require substantial investments in personnel (*e.g.*, new program administrators, faculty, instructors, technicians, etc.)?

8.3 Does the program require substantial investments in labs, equipment, and other non-personnel resources?

8.4 Who pays tuition, tuition remissions, and stipends, and who covers additional costs such as travel expenses incurred by having committees from both institutions?

8.5 How will Rice's intellectual property policies be enforced? If an alternative policy is required, what needs to be addressed?

**9. Administration and Program Governance:**

9.1 To which department, school, or other oversight unit does the program report?

9.2 Who will be on the oversight committee?

9.3 How will this committee function, and how will its members be selected?

9.4 How will administrative and financial conflicts or disagreements be resolved?

9.5 What additional support is needed from departments, institutes/centers, schools, and the central administration at Rice University?

9.6 How will the integrity of the processes, procedures and academic offerings of our partner institution be monitored and kept up to accreditation standards?

**10. Degree Requirements for the General Announcements:** Does the proposal contain the description that will go into the General Announcements?

**11. Launch:**

11.1 How does the timetable for the launch of the program compare to Rice's and the partner institution's internal procedures?

11.2 Do recruitment materials and presentations accurately represent practices and policies of the program?

**12. Academic Support at Rice University:** Are all letters of support in the proposal?

**13. Potential Liabilities and Other Risks:**

13.1 Are there any anticipated issues related to the safety of Rice students and employees that will partake in this program?

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13.2 Are there any significant needs to modify our policies with respect to student admissions, curricular requirements, structure of the program, etc. that might cause problems with students in traditional Rice programs?

**14. Measures of Progress and Success:**

14.1 What metrics will be used to evaluate the progress of the program as a whole?

14.2 What will be the frequency of these evaluations (i.e., annual review and/or milestone assessments after 3, 6, etc. years)?

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