

GETTING A Grip ON STRATEGIC ALLIANCES



In times that call for doing more with less, partnerships among institutions may hold the key to leveraging resources and enhancing program effectiveness.

RECENT DECADES HAVE SEEN UNPRECEDENTED COMPETITION among colleges and universities bucking for top students, private giving, state dollars, and visibility. Despite this burgeoning one-upmanship, the time is right for increased sharing and collaboration among institutions.

Collaboration makes good sense today for several reasons: Most institutions are facing tremendous budget strains; intensifying demographic pressures are confronting all of higher education; and the public is seeking assurance of fiscally responsible institutional operations

and claims of academic success. Yet embracing collaboration doesn't necessarily mean doing away with healthy competition.

Interinstitutional partnerships have been a part of higher education for a long time. In fact, they can be traced to the late 19th and early 20th centuries. While the sharing of library books was common practice among neighboring institutions in the late 1800s, more official arrangements started in the 1900s. The Claremont University Consortium in California has existed since the mid-1920s,

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for example, and Five Colleges, Incorporated has thrived in central Massachusetts since 1965, though its roots go back to the 1950s.

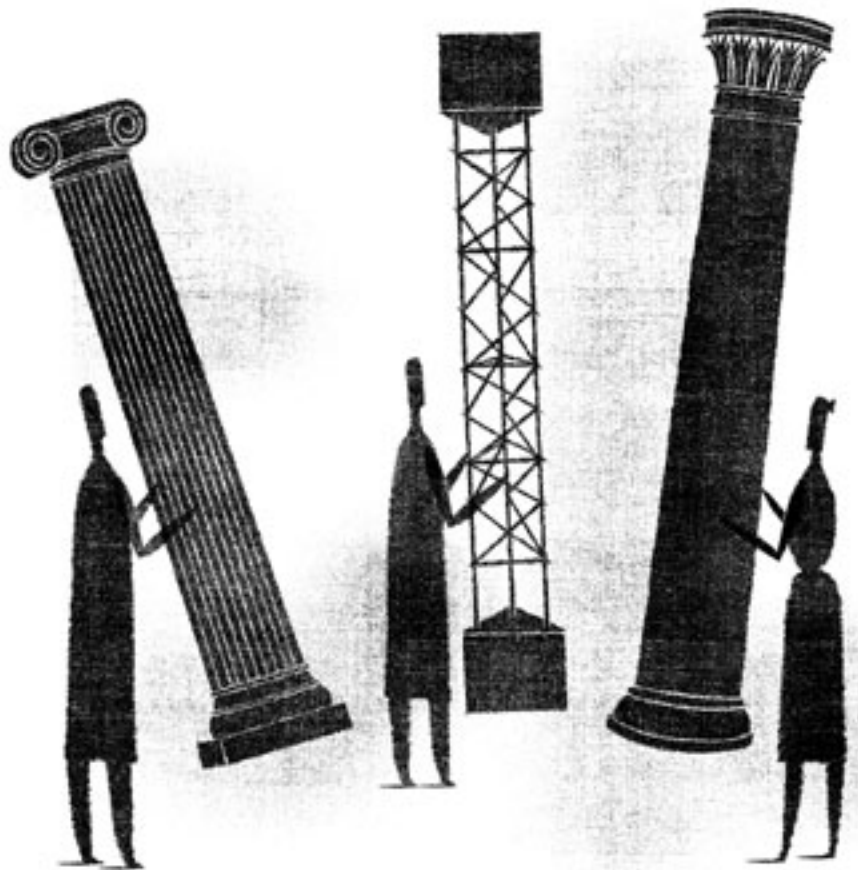
Library consortia bloomed in the 1960s; television and joint-purchasing arrangements aided the growth of collaborative educational programming in the 1960s and 1970s; and today's consortia offer virtual classes, majors, and even full-blown degree programs.

Colleges and universities do not establish consortia exclusively among themselves. The number and complexity of higher education partnerships with external communities—such as local K–12 school systems, social-service agencies, local governments, and business and industrial groups—have increased in the past 20 years.

These partnerships incorporate a tremendous variety of goals and interests and are a reflection of seismic societal forces. Multicampus strategic alliances are used to address local, regional, state, national, and even international challenges. The proliferation of the partners and goals of the collaborative programs emphasize the importance ascribed to these ventures by policymakers and stakeholders inside and outside the academy.

Historically, consortia have been formed to enhance resources, improve program and managerial effectiveness, and apply united force to shared problems. Today, with rapidly shifting economic cycles, declining financial support for higher education, exploding technologies, changing demographics, and a new era of homeland and institutional security concerns, multicampus collaborations warrant a closer look, not only for what they currently do but for what they offer for the future.

How Consortia Add Value. Many colleges and universities are engaged in some kind of consortial arrangement with another institution or with organizations external to higher



education. The Association for Consortium Leadership sponsored an in-depth examination of this topic in *Leveraging Resources Through Partnerships*, a 2002 book edited by Lawrence G. Dotolo and John B. Noftsinger, Jr. The book provides vivid examples and concrete implementation strategies for institutions seeking to establish alliances with other institutions or outside organizations.

It also details key areas of collaboration, which include expanding resources; K–12 engagement; economic, community, and workforce development; technology partnerships; library cooperation; partnerships to serve the military; group purchasing; interinstitutional faculty collaboration; television and media partnerships; and international programs. And it takes on the important issue of assessing a consortium's effectiveness.

The advantages of such partnerships can be seen most clearly in four basic areas.

- *Cost containment.* Consortial arrangements help institutions contain costs. In fact, this may be the most common purpose for

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forming a consortium. Many institutions today contain or reduce expenses through such activities as joint purchasing to leverage buying power, centralized “back offices” to avoid duplication of costs on individual campuses, and shared online access to costly journals.

The Atlanta University Center, for instance, manages academic and administrative computing and runs the library for its six member institutions. The Colleges of the Fenway contracts for student health insurance for its six members, and Graduate Theological Union provides a common registration office for its members. As these examples demonstrate, proximity of the institutions can be helpful if resource sharing is the goal.

- *Academic program enhancement.* Many institutions see ways for consortia to help them enhance academic programs. No institution has the resources to be all things to all people, and in the face of budget cuts it can be challenging to grow programs, add faculty, and support program enhancements. With consortia, institutions can offer students greater academic variety without taking on more costs, and teaching can be strengthened with consortia-led faculty-development activities.

The Associated Colleges of the St. Lawrence Valley, the Associated Colleges of the Twin Cities, and the Lehigh Valley Association of Independent Colleges are examples of consortia offering cross registration for students within their member institutions. Some of these groups even provide transportation to help students move among campuses, and others go beyond course sharing to offer joint majors and shared faculty.

Not all consortia are limited by proximity. The Associated Colleges of the South, comprising institutions in 12 states, offers a “virtual classics department,” making it possible for students from member institutions to major in classics, an academic opportunity that could be prohibitively expensive for an individual campus to fund. Through such consortial arrangements, campuses gain greater academic

vitality and increased responsiveness to student demand. And while these gains aren’t necessarily without cost, they come at lower individual costs because they are shared.

Institutions frequently question the effect that participating in a consortium could have on their “brand.” Will the college’s distinctiveness, visibility, or mission be compromised in any way by such collaboration? Because of this concern, some institutions limit their consortial work to back-office functions that are less visible and therefore less likely to affect their competitiveness. Others believe the consortium contributes to their institution’s visibility and extends their public-relations efforts in helpful ways. Such is the case with members of the Appalachian College Association, for example, whose institutions benefit from the association’s Web site showcasing regional life and culture.

- *Service to the community.* In the past decade or so, a number of consortia have added to their priorities projects that benefit their communities. Some even have community service as their primary objective. This civic-minded work fulfills the mission of many institutions to serve society in ways beyond offering traditional postsecondary education. It also provides an outlet for student-led civic-engagement activities. By joining forces, institutions are able to provide increased and needed services to their communities.

For example, a number of consortia work with public school systems to advance access to college. The Associated Colleges of Illinois offers a college-readiness program designed to help low-income, inner city high school students develop the skills and motivation necessary to graduate from high school and matriculate and succeed in college. The Hartford Consortium for Higher Education, work-

ing in partnership with the local public school system and the business community, also offers a program to boost college access.

Economic development is another area of collaboration. The Valley of Virginia Partnership for Education, through the Shenandoah Valley Technology Center, unites the education and business communities to promote revitalization of communities, development of technology-based business, and workforce development. Benefits of such efforts redound to the community and the institutions in the form of stronger economies, better town-gown relations, and increased educational opportunities for students.

- *Good public policy.* All such collaborations are perceived as a good public policy by policymakers. With legislators, tuition payers, and the public seeking increased accountability and efficiencies from colleges and universities, consortial arrangements make good sense. Funding for higher education—whatever the source—goes farther and adds more value to society if campus costs are controlled, educational opportunities enhanced, and social needs addressed. For those who believe the current budget constraints are here to stay and the demands for cost controls will be long-lasting, collaborations make sense.

Given the healthy prospects, institutions contemplating collaborative arrangements need to consider the value in developing relationships for future endeavors. Consider the consortium as an opportunity for strategic positioning, and look for ways to start small, to ascertain capabilities—both individual and shared—and to build trust for larger initiatives in the future. Building competitiveness through collaboration might be counterintuitive, but it ultimately may prove to be shrewd and effective institutional policy.

Although many forms of consortia exist in higher education, there is room for even more innovation and creativity in expanding collaboration or developing new partnerships not only among higher education institutions but

with state and federal governments and with business and industry. Areas include (1) support for K–12 education, (2) Internet resource sharing and distance learning, (3) economic development and industry initiatives, (4) organizational development and enhancement, (5) research and policy analysis, (6) human-resource development and training, (7) technology development and transfer, and (8) homeland defense and security.

Overcoming Impediments. Studies have shown that several conditions facilitate collaboration. The most common and most powerful facilitator for faculty and staff entering into interinstitutional partnerships is the high-level support of trustees and senior administrators, including presidents, vice presidents, provosts, and deans. Another significant program facilitator is the support and dedication of individual faculty and staff members who engage in collaborative activities.

These findings have obvious implications for promoting interinstitutional collaboration with the individual reward structures of the

KEY QUESTIONS FOR BOARDS TO CONSIDER ABOUT CONSORTIA

- In what consortial arrangements does our institution participate?
- What is the value of such partnerships to our institution?
- What other needs could be addressed by joining or forming a consortium?
- How are consortia considered in strategic discussions and planning?
- Have new consortia been considered in the past five years? With what result?
- How do our policies facilitate or impede high-quality consortial work?

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participating institution. Are administrators and faculty rewarded for collaborative work, or does the institution's tenure and promotion policy or salary structure reward only work done individually?

A final facilitator is trust among the partnering institutions. Trust in this context is built carefully by starting with achievable and carefully articulated mutual goals. As trust grows, so does the opportunity for bolder steps in collaboration. A mutually successful experience and a healthy respect for the ethical grounding of one's partners allow the institutions to embark upon even more complex programs. Trust also is enhanced by not focusing on immediate reciprocity. If the partnership is successful, the institutions in many cases will benefit in different ways at different times. The most important issue is that trust and the relationship remain intact.

There also are impediments to interinstitutional collaboration. The most prevalent is a lack of financial resources to establish such programs. Some consortia receive start-up funding from a combination of sources, including federal and state grants or foundation support. Bureaucratic and funding technicalities also can be substantial impediments to implementing partnerships. Some institutions may be reluctant to share academic courses and credit with institutions not regarded as their peers in academic quality.

Many of these barriers are rooted in state law and policy for public institutions and in institutional rules and regulations for private ones. A number of the funding technicalities that frustrate faculty are derived from federal policies that govern federally sponsored grants and contracts. Finally, communication difficulties can impede some collaborations. Successful consortia, whether composed of neighboring institutions or institutions from around the world, have frequent, open communication among members, and trust is a common feature of that communication.

Given the current challenges facing higher

education, the academy must embrace new partners and investigate new models of providing services and delivering on promises. Higher education will be able to meet society's needs—improving people's lives intellectually, economically, socially, and culturally—if it takes advantage of all appropriate opportunities. Colleges and universities can be the catalyst in forming alliances that improve local, national, and international communities and solve the complex challenges our world faces.

Institutions can reap large rewards by having clearly articulated programmatic goals that serve mutual interests, by trusting their partners, and by deemphasizing short-term reciprocity. The ultimate payoff for these relationships is not the short-term tactical improvements through program enhancement and resource maximization. The long-term benefit is a strategic one that positions the successful partners to collaborate on future projects, assured of the trusted partner's ethical grounding and institutional capabilities.

Strategic partnerships among higher education institutions—and with other sectors of society—offer ways to meet pressing needs, take advantage of emerging opportunities with a minimum of resource investment, and deliver cost-effective and innovative academic, administrative, and public-service programs. ♦

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