

Inter-Institutional Distance Education Alliances: When, Why, Who, and How

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Inter-institutional distance education program alliances enable collaborating universities to deliver online academic programs that capitalize on their collective technological and human capacities. One such alliance is the Great Plains Interactive Distance Education Alliance (Great Plains IDEA) www.gpidea.org with a membership of ten universities in ten states that sponsors inter-institutional on-line graduate programs.

Faculty members employed at partner institutions develop and deliver the online inter-institutional programs. Academic administrators employed at partner institutions comprise the alliance board of directors. The board of directors contracts with one partner institution to provide alliance management services.

Students in alliance sponsored programs are admitted to one of the partner universities, enroll in all courses at that university, and graduate from that university. They study under faculty from several alliance universities and with students enrolled at other universities. All students pay the same price for courses. Course income is distributed 75% to the teaching university, 12.5% to the admitting university, and 12.5% to the alliance to support core costs.

The Great Plains IDEA partner universities engaged in a three year U.S. Department of Education FIPSE sponsored project awarded to Kansas State University to develop models for inter-institutional collaboration. Models documents are available for review on the Great Plains IDEA website. Model practices are described below.

When Is an Alliance Appropriate?

Successful inter-institutional distance education programs capitalize on the following conditions.

Pre-existing relationships. Program administrators and/or program faculty have prior professional working relationships. Ideally, participants in the proposed partnership have previously teamed up on research projects, courses, or other professional endeavors.

Equal partners. Faculty participants consider their counterparts at partner universities to be excellent colleagues. Ideally all faculty participants feel they are equal partners in a program venture that is better than any one of them could accomplish with their institutional colleagues and institutional resources.

Institutional support for faculty participants. Faculty engaged in inter-institutional program development and delivery have informed their supervisors and have approval to participate. Ideally participants have full support of their departmental colleagues as well as appropriate academic administrators.

Management similarities. Collaborating institutions in the inter-institutional program can create appropriate matches in terms of academic calendars, price per credit hour, inter-institutional transfer of student data, program admission requirements, etc. Ideally, institutional finance officers, distance education officers, registrars, and graduate school administrators are actively engaged in creating simple inter-institutional systems that work.

Vision. Participants in planning the inter-institutional program identify a common, compelling vision for their work together. Ideally, the academic discipline at large is extraordinarily well served by the shared vision.

Urgency. Participants share a sense of urgency about developing the curriculum, approving the curriculum on the partner campuses, marketing the program, admitting students, and assuring that excellent courses are developed, taught, and assessed. Ideally, programs move from initial planning meeting to full implementation within 18 months.

Engaged participants. The people who represent the partner universities as administrative and faculty participants are engaged in and supportive of the partnership program. Ideally, the partnership is led by individuals who commit to advancing their institution's stature by development of collaborative programs and who have a tendency to behave generously toward their partners.

Supportive academic policies. Policy, practice, and procedural scaffolding is in place at each partner university to support inter-institutional programs. Ideally this scaffolding permits partner universities to assure that institutional standards are maintained, that inter-institutional programs are not "managed by exception," and that few or no additional administrative costs are incurred.

Supportive student services. Each partner supports its students in the inter-institutional program as well as it supports its on campus students. Ideally, each partner employs the services of a coordinator who assists distance students as they seek admission, enroll in courses, file for degree completion, etc—thus freeing faculty to provide academic rather than logistical support.

Institutional culture. Campus leaders support experimentation with partnership programs as a route to mainstreaming such practices. Ideally, institutions represented within the partnership have cultures that support inter-institutional partnerships.

Attributes of Administrative Participants in Inter-Institutional Alliances

Inter-institutional programs are supported by many people at partner universities—the participating faculty and members of the alliance leadership team who experience benefits and others whose work is complicated by the demands of partnering.

An academic administrator who provides local leadership for an inter-institutional academic program needs to establish collegial working arrangements with the institution's chief financial officer, with the registrar, with the director of continuing education, and, for post-baccalaureate programs, the graduate dean and graduate faculty leadership team. Successful academic leaders of inter-institutional partnerships are strategic in their management of the following administrative tasks.

Management of faculty workloads. Structure the workloads for faculty teaching in inter-institutional programs so they remain in the good graces of their departmental colleagues and experience more rewards than costs from their participation in the inter-institutional program.

Management of program approval and review. Assure that inter-institutional programs meet or exceed departmental standards and that compliance with all program approval and review processes is achieved.

Colleague communication. Fully and frequently inform inter-institutional program faculty, their departmental colleagues, and the impacted institutional offices (finance, distance education, registration, graduate education) about program accomplishments, problems, assessment outcomes, and plans.

Policies and practices. Engage the appropriate individuals in developing policies and practices that are supportive of the inter-institutional program and its faculty and student participants.

Inter-Institutional Alliance Management

Inter-institutional distance education alliances are not self-sustaining. Such alliances require leadership teams that find effective ways to work together collegially while each also works in the best interests of his/her employing institution.

Base practice on principles. By articulating core principles for working together, alliance leaders can find common ground on policies and practices. The following deceptively simple core principles have proven their merits in the work of the Great Plains IDEA—Behave as equals. Share leadership. Respect and accommodate institutional differences. Simplify student access.

Minimize what is centralized. Inter-institutional alliances have core functions such as oversight of student data exchange systems, alliance website maintenance, records management, and planning that are best centralized. Costs can be contained by distributing responsibilities for administrative support and oversight among the partner institutions.

Confront conflicts. Alliances do not advance by ignoring meddlesome problems but by managing them. Alliance leaders aggregate competing ideas and issues of concern and capitalize on the plethora of ideas and issues to advance the common work. They do not rush to compromise. Compromise generally results in a “lowest common denominator” outcome—one that is acceptable to all but engaging to none. Profoundly satisfying outcomes are only reached through the free flow of competing ideas.

Agree on a common price. Tuitions vary among partners in inter-institutional distance education alliances. Fees also vary. By agreeing on a common “price” that respects different tuition/fee arrangements among the partner institutions, the alliance can manage tuition inequities among institutions, allow students to enroll in all courses at their admitting university, and potentially finance the core functions of the alliance through student enrollments in courses.

Faculty work and administrator work. As inter-institutional programs develop, there is a tendency for faculty and administrators to intrude on the appropriate responsibilities of one another. In inter-institutional programs, just as in institution-based programs, the work progresses most smoothly when the administrative team manages the policies, processes, and oversight and the faculty team manages the academic planning and instruction.

Institutional Policies and Practices

Faced with an array of institutional rules, alliance leaders will need to negotiate a pathway through them.

Is it a rule? Institutional rules can support or impede inter-institutional program development and deployment. Rules in higher education are interesting phenomena. Sometimes what is perceived as a binding obligation is at most an oral tradition. Other times what is thought to be optional is actually

obligatory. The work of academic administrators and faculty is subject to many institutional policies and practices that the affected administrators and faculty cannot change to advance their own program's purposes—even when the purpose is lofty.

Whose rule is it? Although rules impact practice throughout the academy, rules always come with an address. The first step in changing a rule is to determine its address—the place where responsibility for enforcing or changing the rule rests. The responsible entity can, and frequently does, change the rule to make it more supportive of emerging needs.

What is the intent of the rule? Rules are invoked frequently in inter-institutional collaborations as the rationale for why something cannot be done or to explain why an idea would put institutional standards at risk. Used this way, limitations attributed to rules may actually be excuses for inaction. Institutional standards do require protection—rules can be crafted that maintain institutional standards and support inter-institutional distance education programs.

Biographical Sketch

Dr. Virginia Moxley is the Associate Dean for Scholarship and Research in the College of Human Ecology and Co-Director of the Institute for Academic Alliances at Kansas State University. Moxley has extensive experience in academic administration and is a founding member of the Great Plains Interactive Distance Education Alliance (Great Plains IDEA) and recently completed a term as chair of the Great Plains IDEA Board of Directors.

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