

INTER-INSTITUTIONAL ACADEMIC ALLIANCES— WHEN, WHY, WHO, AND HOW

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Abstract

Universities are collaborating to deliver online academic programs that capitalize on their technological and human capacities. Inter-institutional programs have the advantages of distributed risks, increased reach, and greater depth and scope. This paper focuses on the attributes of administrative teams that successfully lead such alliances and the strategies they employ to create sustainable programs.

Introduction

Academic chairpersons are confronted with competing demands to sustain the academic integrity and quality of departmental programs and concurrently meet the rapidly changing needs for new academic program configurations and expanded outreach. Doing both with available human, technological, and financial resources requires innovative solutions. Collaborating with peers at other universities to develop and deliver inter-institutional online academic programs allows faculty additional opportunities to work to their strengths, allows new programs to emerge from the collective strengths of faculty employed by multiple universities, and provides needed programs to a dispersed population of students.

The author of this paper, in addition to serving as associate dean, is co-director of the Kansas State University Institute for Academic Alliances (IAA, <http://www.ksu.edu/iaa>) and chairman of the Board of Directors for the Great Plains Interactive Distance Education Alliances (Great Plains IDEA, <http://www.gpidea.org>). The Great Plains IDEA sponsors inter-institutional master's degrees and post-baccalaureate certificates. Membership in the alliance is held by ten colleges of human sciences in ten research universities in ten states. Current program areas include family financial planning, gerontology, youth development, and merchandising.

Collaborations that lead to inter-institutional academic programs generally begin with an impetus resulting from an identified but unmet need. Initially, the search for solutions engages participants in thinking about purpose, desired outcomes, troubling obstacles, vexing problems and promising possibilities. In the best collaborations, divergent positions are brought to the table and assimilated into a powerfully engaging shared vision for cooperatively achieving outcomes.

The Great Plains IDEA is a *program* alliance. Program alliances are organized to meet disciplinary needs that no one institution can meet alone. The administrative participants in program alliances are those who have direct oversight of the faculty who participate in the inter-institutional programs. The administrative infrastructure that binds the alliance together is minimal (Moxley & Maes, p. 142).

Program alliances tend to be much more informal and less hierarchical than institution-wide alliances. Program alliances generally begin when a group of academic administrators bring good will, friendship, generosity, and vision to a collective conversation about what they might achieve together for the mutual benefit of their disciplines, faculty, and students. In these alliances, binding agreements are created after the commitment to the collaboration is firmly established by the people creating the partnership. Any alliance that creates legal documents before it creates a shared vision is likely to fail because participants will become frustrated with the focus on detail rather than on outcomes. The strongest alliances begin with friendly competitors who become collaborators.

As part of a U.S. Department of Education FIPSE/LAAP grant awarded to Kansas State University entitled “A National Model for Inter-Institutional Postbaccalaureate Programs,” Great Plains IDEA institutional participants developed models for inter-institutional Internet-based programs. The work undertaken by the Great Plains IDEA partners led to the development of the “Great Plains IDEA Model for Inter-institutional Distance Education Program Alliances.”

The Great Plains IDEA Model For Inter-Institutional Distance Education Program Alliances¹

A program alliance is a joint project of member institutions to support inter-institutional Internet-based programs.

Academic programs are the core of the Alliance. Academic credit and degrees are awarded by each member institution. Curricula are developed by inter-institutional faculty teams.

Although the curriculum is the same, the program name, course titles and course numbers are similar, but may be unique to each member institution.

All courses and curricula receive full institutional review prior to implementation and meet institutional academic standards.

Program faculty who meet the qualifications for teaching at their employing institution are granted de facto teaching credentials at other member institutions.

Students seek admission to the institution of their choice and institutional admission standards and processes prevail.

Assessment of instructional program quality and student learning is undertaken by the alliance and reported by each institution.

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The Alliance culture is egalitarian and participatory and accommodates differences in institutional cultures. Alliance leadership is vested in a Board of Directors, and Alliance management is coordinated by a lead institution chosen by the board.

The program alliance is formed and led by an inter-institutional board of college level academic administrators who elect officers from among its members.

Operational policies and procedures are recommended by experts representing registrars, institutional finance, continuing education, and graduate schools at member institutions.

Central Alliance functions (financial and data transaction oversight; website maintenance; communications, governance, and program management support) are managed by a “lead institution.”

Alliance information is available at the Alliance website and program information is available at both the Alliance website and institutional websites.

Alliance financial support comes from student enrollments in courses and from in-kind contributions from partner institutions. No membership fees are assessed. The Alliance holds no property.

Students pay a negotiated common price/credit hour to the institution at which they matriculate. Of this price, 75% supports costs at the teaching institution, 12.5% supports costs at the admitting and enrolling institution, and 12.5% supports Alliance costs.

Course development and delivery costs and faculty workload assignments are institutional responsibilities.

When is an inter-institutional program appropriate?

Inter-institutional academic programs are appropriate when program demand is large and urgent, and support for the program cannot reasonably be underwritten by any one of the partner universities acting alone (Moxley & Maes, p. 150). Neither faculty nor administrators can initiate an inter-institutional program without the support of the other. If faculty members, academic administrators, and others whose work is impacted by the inter-institutional endeavor are not invested in the success of the shared venture, the progress and sustainability of the alliance will be compromised.

The choice of program partners is strategically significant. Ideal partner institutions are those that are considered “peers” and where individuals who will invest in building the alliance have pre-existing positive working relationships. Generally “alike” institutions (public/public; research intensive/research intensive; private/private; two-year/two-year) find collaboration easiest. When institutional partners in the alliance differ on a critical measure (type, size, status), alliance developers will need to manage the power and/or prestige imbalance in ways that assure that teamwork can thrive in the presence of the differences.

Inter-institutional program alliances involve much more than course sharing. Strategic alliances should create new value for all partners (Kanter, p. 97). At the outset, most collaborations begin with modest goals. Over time, as success in initial undertakings becomes apparent, alliance partners will capitalize on their web of relationships to expand the work they undertake.

Alliances have cultures and contexts—and the partner institutions in the alliance also have cultures and contexts. These cultures and contexts merit attention. Context is relevant to motivation, and culture to reputation. One way or another, successful alliances enhance motivation to participate and participants' willingness to take some reputational risks.

Planning for inter-institutional program implementation is rigorous—the program plan must meet the standards for approval at all partner universities and undergo full review at all participating institutions. The assessment and renewal plans for inter-institutional programs must meet the standards of the institutions that participate because regional accreditors will examine outcomes on an institution by institution basis.

Choose partners well. Ideally, the partnership will allow some of the nation's top scholars in the discipline to collaborate on a single, shared program. Partners to avoid are those that create drag on the enterprise by preventing progress because they fail to comprehend, or fail to perform, or fail to show up. Partner institutions are only as good as the people those institutions commit to the work of the alliance.

What are the attributes of good partners in inter-institutional programs?

Inter-institutional programs are supported by a dense web of relationships among many people at partner universities—the initiators who are fully supportive of the program because they experience its benefits—and others, who may not experience benefits, whose work is made harder by participation in the inter-institutional program (Kanter, p. 104).

Any academic administrator who is providing local leadership for an inter-institutional academic program will need 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 for inter-institutional programs will:

Manage the workload for faculty teaching in inter-institutional programs in ways that help to assure that faculty participants in these programs remain in the good graces of their departmental colleagues and experience more rewards than costs from their participation in the inter-institutional program.

Assure that the inter-institutional program standards meet or exceed departmental standards, and that all program approval and review processes are managed well.

Fully inform the impacted institutional offices (finance, distance education, registration, graduate education) throughout the process.

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

What policies, processes, and practices support the implementation and delivery of inter-institutional programs?

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 rule is actually an oral tradition. The work of academic administrators and faculty is subject to many institutional policies and practices (rules) that the affected administrators and faculty cannot change to advance their own purposes—even when the purpose is lofty.

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.

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.

Faced with an array of institutional rules, alliance leaders will need to negotiate a pathway through them. All rules exist for a reason, and, except for those that remain on the books because of inertia and should be eliminated, finding the intent that led to the rule will enable most institutions to change the language to be more inclusive, more flexible, or simply more favorable to alternative program configurations without lowering the standards that the rule was created to protect.

As inter-institutional alliances mature, policies will emerge. Before policies are created, alliance members should agree on principles for working together (Moxley & Maes, p. 146). John Carver, in *Boards that Make a Difference*, urges boards to make principles explicit. Implicit principles and policies are always covertly in effect (p. 43). The dilemma with implicit principles is that they are understood differently by each partner and easily become the source of dissension. Alliances work best when they are built on explicit principles. In the Great Plains IDEA, the principles that guide the work of the Alliance are these:

- Behave as equals.
- Share leadership.
- Respect and accommodate institutional differences.
- Simplify student access.
- Seek low input/high impact solutions.

There is a tendency, as inter-institutional programs develop, 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.

When faculty plan inter-institutional programs, their initial impulse is to collect currently available online courses and call the result an inter-institutional program. This is the worst way to begin—but it happens because most faculty’s experience with curriculum development is work done in increments by tweaking existing courses and curricula. Building any program based on the easily available component parts is assured to result in a fragmented, redundant, and altogether ordinary outcome—not an outcome that will be attractive to the best faculty and students in the discipline.

The most successful inter-institutional programs are built by faculty who begin with a thorough discussion of the student learning outcomes they seek, and then discuss the theoretical framework(s) that provide the foundation for the program and the educational standards they expect from each other. After these discussions result in an outcome that engages the commitment of the faculty, they move ahead with developing courses and curricula and distributing instructional assignments.

Students will expect inter-institutional programs to feel like institutional programs. This outcome is possible when each institution admits, enrolls, and graduates its own students in the shared program, and when each institution provides the appropriate student services and academic support that students need. Collectively, the partner universities must arrive at a common price. So, irrespective of the institution offering a course, the student pays the same price for enrolling. A common price is comprised of a mix of tuition and fees; the ratio of tuition/fees that makes up the price will vary from institution to institution.

The basics for inter-institutional academic program management are:

Enrollment management should occur at the course level rather than by imposing arbitrary program admission limits. Students in on-line programs tend to engage in part-time study. Financial models work best when courses are filled to optimum capacity.

Each partner institution should assume primary instructional oversight for one or more courses.

Once a course is offered, it will need to be repeated at least annually to accommodate new entrants to the program.

To assure that student learning outcomes are assessed and program changes implemented, annual reports from each program are needed.

Inter-institutional programs, like campus-based programs, require on-going administrative and academic inputs. Capable faculty and administrative leadership for the program is required to create a sustainable program that improves rather than degrades over time.

Inter-institutional programs require continuing support from the partner universities. For the protection of the partner institutions, this support needs to be formalized in a binding agreement.

Inter-institutional partnerships are governed by teams of administrators who meet occasionally and communicate frequently to advance their shared academic agenda. A common sense approach to face-to-face meetings will enable participants to become well acquainted with each other, to communicate easily between meetings with all participants, to have an easily accessible record of the meeting's accomplishments, and to know the objectives to be accomplished before the meeting convenes.

As important as policies are in the inter-working of an alliance, they can be overdone. Carver (p. 44) recommends that policies should be explicit, current, literal, centrally available, brief and encompassing. He also states that when it comes to policies, brevity is the unheralded secret of excellence.

Inter-institutional programs must be institutionally approved and reviewed and must meet institutional program requirements. The institutional approval process is relatively easy to manage because it is done once. However, the review process is ongoing and requires continuing attention. It is easy for student learning assessment plans to fall apart in the implementation phase—particularly when there are faculty at multiple universities engaged in the program. Inter-institutional programs must provide annual written reports of their status and include assessment outcomes and resulting program improvements that can be utilized in the planning and reporting schemes of the partner institutions.

How will participation in inter-institutional program partnerships change the work of the departmental chairperson?

The alliance development process is composed of multiple steps—all of which are significant. The initial step is to identify a need to be met, then identify and meet with likely partners. In the process of meeting to discuss possibilities, a web of relationships develops. The relationships are essential because there is no administrative hierarchy to impose order or deadlines or enforce compliance—all of these things emerge naturally from good working relationships among alliance academic leaders. Once the web of relationships has been formed, then a policy and practice scaffolding can be built. The scaffolding will assure that agreements stay in place, that policies can be easily accessed and universally complied with, and that work gets done in the most reasonable way without duplication of effort or escalation in red tape.

Inter-institutional program leadership is appropriately vested in an inter-institutional team of academic administrators. When it comes to leadership of inter-institutional initiatives, the ability to manage conflict well is an essential attribute.

The goal of an alliance leader should not be to avoid conflict, but to aggregate competing ideas and the issues of concern and capitalize on the ideas and issues to advance the standards, the outcomes, and the functioning of the group.

Compromise should not be sought. Compromise generally results in a “lowest common denominator” outcome—one that is acceptable to all but engaging to none. Alliance building is an intellectually and emotionally intense endeavor of great complexity (Moxley & Maes). Individuals will remain engaged in work of this intensity only if the outcomes are profoundly satisfying in ways that participants realize they could not attain individually.

The leadership of inter-institutional program alliances cannot be the exclusive right of the founding member(s). Leadership succession plans are essential. Over time, leaders can lose their drive to innovate. They can get comfortable with the status quo. They can discourage leadership activities of colleagues. In hierarchical administrative structures, higher-ranking administrators are in place to assure that administrative leaders remain effective over time. In alliances where administrative relationships are predominantly horizontal, policies and practices can achieve what position authority does within institutions: assure that administrative leadership is vested in participants with the desire and the capability to lead the alliance. Additionally, over the course of a year or two, members of the alliance will retire, move to non-alliance institutions, change positions within the university, or lose their desire to lead the inter-institutional endeavor. Such changes typify academic careers and can be accommodated with leadership succession plans. Academic administrators engaged in the leadership team for inter-institutional programs will discover that frequent and intentional communication is essential. Due to geographic separation, communication is rarely accidental—it only occurs when someone in the team initiates it. Furthermore, because most communication is Internet-based, a centralized, institution-neutral website is needed to provide access to shared information. Listservs are needed to assure that requests for action arrive in the recipients “in box” in a timely way. The guidelines for good communication in inter-institutional programs are similar to guidelines for departmental communications: document things as you go; make the documentation accessible to all; and when you request action, send frequent reminders until a response is received.

Because students in distance education programs lack mental maps of the campus, the web site and the electronic communications system must make up for this deficiency. In the Great Plains IDEA, each partner institution has assigned the role of campus coordinator to a staff member. The campus coordinator assumes the “map-making” function for students at a distance. Faculty advisors are free to interact with students about academic issues, not campus system issues. The campus coordinators:

Facilitate the student recruitment and admissions processes.

Assure that course and program information is available to students when they need it.

Provide information to students and faculty and to other partners in the alliance.

Manage the inter-institutional database entries and the inter-institutional searchable course catalog information.

Maintain the institutional webpage program information and appropriate links.

Summary

The realities of collaboration among universities include:

The partners in the collaboration will remain competitors. This can be accommodated if the people in the collaboration also remain friends, and if their behaviors toward each other and on behalf of the alliance demonstrate generosity and good will.

Alliance participants cannot skip the hard parts of alliance building—the disagreements, the divergent policies, the engagement of other functional entities at the partner institutions, who may perceive the alliance to be a burden rather than an asset.

A sense of urgency must be maintained. This can be done by setting deadlines for action, by joint agreements about timelines and standards for achievement. Without urgency, there will be no progress because competing interests will capture the attention and the time of partners.

As in any complex human endeavor, the management of time and communication will be demanding and continuous.

The leadership attributes that serve administrators well in on-campus settings are the same ones that serve them well in inter-institutional settings.

References

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