

# Fragile Partnership to Sustainable Alliance: Rapid-Response Academic Program Development

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ACADEMIC ALLIANCES ARE ONE OF THE BEST SOLUTIONS for cost containment in higher education today. Yet, while developing new single-institution degree programs is prohibitively costly, institutions perceive them to be the easiest route. Consequently, those costs are then passed on to the learners, and population segments that have historically lacked access to higher education remain on the outside. A system that values inter-institutional program partnerships can offer more affordable opportunities to more people, but for that to happen, collaboration must gain appeal as a *practical* solution to today's challenges.

Academic collaborations enable cost-containment, and they also allow partners to rapidly respond to workforce shortages and new job markets, e.g., nuclear engineering, nanotechnology, biosecurity, etc. The typical university is not agile enough to downsize one department today while building up a new strategic area tomorrow. But, together, universities can take the best in specialized fields and join them with their counterparts at similar institutions to rapidly build new programs in targeted growth areas.

Institutions of the future must rapidly respond to the market demand of employers and students to thrive in today's educational marketplace. However, developing and implementing new online programs in a timely manner challenges even the most nimble and progressive university leaders. This is where Kansas State University's Institute for Academic Alliances (IAA, [www.ksu.edu/iaa](http://www.ksu.edu/iaa)) steps in to help.

## **Building on the Great Plains IDEA**

The IAA enables timely development of sustainable inter-institutional programs by helping administrators create innovative policies, procedures, and agreements while respecting and accommodating institutional differences. The IAA staff's first big success was with the Great Plains Interactive Distance Education Alliance (Great Plains IDEA, [www.gpidea.org](http://www.gpidea.org)), an eleven-state, eleven-institution alliance with graduate programs in Family Financial Planning, Gerontology, Youth Development, Community Development, and Merchandising. Great Plains IDEA, with its shared curriculum and common price, has demonstrated that alliances do work and are sustainable. Not only has the Great Plains IDEA demonstrated success, the IAA is building on the program alliance model by working with other consortiums across the country that are developing programs in

varied areas, including Logistics, Food Security, Agriculture Mechanization, Cross-Cultural Nursing, Water Resources, Nuclear Engineering, and Grassland Management.

### **Benefits of Inter-Institutional Collaboration**

Collaboration offers a strategic opportunity for universities that want to offer a program in an emerging area. Sustainable program alliances benefit society, students, faculty, and institutions.

*Societal Benefits* – Combining the latest technologies with a collegial faculty team enables institutions to offer accessible educational opportunities in emerging fields to students around the world and, most notably, to population segments that have historically lacked access to the benefits of higher education.

*Student Benefits* – Students profit when institutions offer fully online inter-institutional programs that enable students to enroll at one “home” institution, take courses at any of the institutions participating in the program, and receive a degree from their “home institution.” When courses are cross-listed at each of the participating degree-granting institutions, students do not have to hassle with transferring credits from one institution to another. Additionally, each participating institution offers student support services, advising, and financial assistance to the students enrolled at their institution.

*Faculty Benefits* – A grassroots approach to collaboration empowers faculty to play an active role in the growth and development of their department by developing and delivering collaborative programs in new and emerging fields. The establishment of a faculty “community” across institutions enhances peer interaction within specialized disciplines while simultaneously providing an outlet for faculty creativity.

*Institutional Benefits* – In times of fiscal uncertainty, institutional resources are certainly not expanding, and faculty and administrators are struggling to acquire the resources to respond to emerging needs. Consequently, administrators are forced to choose between “the bottom line” and the integrity of their institution and programs. Collaborative agreements offer a solution to this painful dilemma. Alliances allow institutions to collectively respond to emerging needs by combining their resources to expand each institution’s outreach. Academic partnerships turn universities into entrepreneurs by enabling them to embark on exciting new paths in higher education while generating a sustainable income stream.

### **Strategies for Sustainable Program Alliances**

Drawing from the lessons learned of consortia across the nation, the IAA promotes the use of the following strategies in the development and management of inter-institutional academic alliances.

*Market Demand Research* – Faculty interested in developing a new program should first determine if there is market demand for the program. How many new employees are needed in the marketplace over the next 10 years, and what skills sets are preferred?

Will the target audience pursue the proposed degree or certificate? In what areas would accessible and affordable programs best serve the region? The nation? What's the competition offering? What does my institution and institutional partners have to offer?

*Institutional Partners* – Not all institutions are a good match. Before launching a program alliance, institutions should look for suitable partners. Stable academic partnerships are often 1) built on existing organizational or collegial connections, 2) between similar type institutions that have similar faculty reward and incentive structures, 3) anchored by faculty who have the same basic philosophy/mission but have complementary areas of expertise, and 4) across institutions that have similar student populations.

*Faculty Selection* – Developing an outstanding collaborative academic program depends upon the involvement of exceptional faculty members. The IAA faculty selection module helps faculty decide whether to participate and helps department heads consider the implications of faculty participation.

*Institutional Policy and Practice Survey* – In program alliances, the policies and practices of multiple institutions come into play. A policy and practice survey collects information faculty and administrators can use to successfully implement and sustain a high-quality inter-institutional academic program.

*Campus Coordinator* – The day-to-day alliance operations are best handled by a point person at each campus who ensures student access to support services; coordinates the courses, student enrollment and course access, information and fund exchange; and maintains the alliance webpage and course catalog.

*ExpanSIS Data System* – Secure exchange of student information across institutions is enabled with ExpanSIS, a web-based information system for multi-institution course and program management.

*Marketing* – A great program will never see enough enrollments if it isn't advertised through word of mouth, brochures, webpage, etc. Collaborating institutions must work both in tandem and separately to market their programs. Marketing is a good example of how collaboration leads to healthy competition.

Inter-institutional collaboration brings unique challenges, but barriers can be overcome when the participants involved have common goals. Offering an in-demand program that meets significant regional or national needs means that institutions have to learn how to share curriculum and faculty expertise, acknowledge institutional similarities and differences, and recognize potential pitfalls as the first step to finding workable solutions. Finding that common ground is worth it.