

## Collaborations Great and Small

Collaboration: the word is on everybody's tongue these days. It's even becoming such a cliché that new terms are coined daily to describe the activity. In the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, the dean of the Haas School of Business at the University of California–Berkeley, Laura D'Andrea Tyson, described a new academic collaboration among three elite business schools as representing “a future in which schools regularly team or co-brand to offer their best courses to students and executives who are located at multiple sites around the world and who need and want such training now” (<http://www.chronicle.com/distance>), June 19, 2000). Collaboration as co-branding . . . let's keep that idea in mind.

Collaboration becomes especially seductive to contemplate whenever costs are high and expertise is scarce. Information technology would appear to be a perfect case in point, especially at small colleges such as my own. But when we look around for IT-related inter-institutional collaborations that have produced substantive outcomes *plus* cost-savings, examples are not yet plentiful. Many presidents of small colleges are quite leery when confronted with technology issues. They barely have a handle on the cost of maintaining their current IT environments, and many have no idea what lies ahead (to be fair, who does?). They may hesitate to take the results of their fiercely debated expenditures, to say nothing of their increasingly high-paid intellectual capital, and share with institutions that are clearly their competitors. Their internal resources are already stretched, they

might argue, and collaborations are well-known to divert attention from the main course and take inordinate amounts of time; besides, the outcomes of IT collaboration are speculative at best.

Yet the importance of collaboration in the IT field has been well-recognized for years by the directors of computing at small colleges. The fifteen-year-old Consortium for Liberal Arts Colleges (CLAC), for instance, promotes an extraordinarily noncompetitive exchange of ideas among IT leaders at sixty small colleges. A “quick survey” on the CLAC listserv yields up to forty candid, thorough responses on subjects ranging from technologies for remote access or multimedia streaming to salary studies and innovative hiring practices. More formally, collaborative projects among groups of small colleges, sponsored by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, have helped enormously with integrating new technologies into teaching and learning in ways that few of the campuses could have accomplished alone.

But the barriers to successful collaborations, whether great or small, are formidable, and the benefits are not always realized. The most significant barrier is the failure to abandon the stance of competitors and to espouse a common goal. Other barriers are organizational, ranging from cultural chasms and hierarchies that separate the partners to unequal distribution of effort and the fear of lost identity. Collaboration outcomes can be unsatisfactory if reduced, as they often must be, to suit the lowest common denominator, and the logistics of sharing at a distance can frustrate the

whole enterprise. Any of these barriers might prevent us from realizing the benefits of collaboration. Nevertheless, in the highly connected, resource-rich, interactive, and, unfortunately, expensive environment now being created with information technologies, isolation is simply not an option.

Successful collaborations must begin at home. Getting staff to work on projects or services across departments within a school develops basic habits that prepare both the staff and the institution for the more difficult and elaborate activities involved in partnerships and consortial arrangements with other institutions. Intra-institutional collaborations are not especially hard to develop, but they require leadership, patience, and encouragement from the highest levels. They demonstrate the value of sharing and build that value into the fabric of the institution.

Whether or not we've done a good job at building internal collaborations, many small colleges are already engaged, in one way or another, in inter-institutional partnerships. Some of these partnerships are experimental or intentionally transient; some are long-standing, founded perhaps on expediency but now deeply grounded in the culture of the institutions; others have been formed for specific projects, often based on grant initiatives. Many of these inter-institutional partnerships have focused on developing or improving academic programs and until recently may have had little to do with IT. That has changed, as consortia such as the Associated Colleges of the South or the Center for Educational Technology at

Middlebury College take as their mission using or disseminating information technologies to improve academic quality at small colleges.

I believe that those of us who work at small colleges are going to find ourselves increasingly engaged in, and even building, much more comprehensive regional and national consortia, for the fundamental strategic purposes of comprehending, managing, and affording the next generation of IT infrastructure and services. These new or reconceptualized consortia will undoubtedly contribute to our survival as institutions capable of continuing in our common mission of educating leaders and strong citizens for the twenty-first century. We will enter into such consortia for pragmatic reasons: for sharing, and thus helping to control, the costs related to the next generation of “basic” technical services that will be needed by all small colleges but that will probably not be affordable for most.

This need to collaborate for the development of infrastructure and for the delivery of basic services will not be limited to those whose mission is distributed instruction. The rapidly increasing interconnectedness of the IT infrastructure will make these collaborations just as critical for those of us who remain committed to residential teaching and learning as for those who find and serve their students at a distance. The capabilities of the networks and network services being developed by businesses, by various federal agencies, and by the Internet2 consortium, for instance, are not now of central concern to most of us. They are, in fact, little more than exciting experiments at the R1 universities. Soon, however, connecting to these advanced networks and integrating their features with our own internal networks will be an attractive option for small colleges. Eventually this will be a requirement for the way we conduct our teaching, our research, and even our administrative business.

How will we prepare ourselves? The best and only truly feasible answer is: together.

We first need to work together simply to understand the technical implications of these complex new technologies as they emerge. We need to plan and learn how to build campus technology installations that are based on common standards, some of which are not yet fully in place. At a recent meeting sponsored by the President's Information Technology Advisory Committee (PITAC) and EDUCAUSE, representatives from small colleges and regional

our peer institutions and to disseminate our models of collaborative planning and development.

Finally, we need to work together to understand how we can afford these critical new technologies. As we engage in this discussion, we may find ourselves collaborating to create joint purchasing agencies. We will be partnering, in groups, with vendors for acquiring hardware and software (in fact, some of us are already beginning to do so). We will be devising new, joint strategies for deploying ISP, ASP, and SAN services and, in partnership with our libraries,

for acquiring access to vast collections of texts, sounds, and images. We may even be finding innovative ways to share the cost of advanced technology support centers.

One of my colleagues at a sister institution recently asked whether this kind of fundamental collaboration regarding IT would “Wal-Mart-ize” small colleges, rendering them strong and financially healthy as a group but ultimately indistinguishable from one other, and undistinguished. For me, the answer is straightforward: “Won't happen.” Information technologies are merely tools;

they provide access to resources and enable us to do our work. The mission of each institution of higher education in the United States is, and should be, distinctive. The way that each institution builds on a robust, ubiquitous, standards-based IT infrastructure should reflect and enhance its most distinctive characteristics. To enable this distinctiveness is our common challenge and our common goal. And if we decide to engage in a little “co-branding” along the way, it will be just that much more important for the partners to be equally strong. On the excellence of all will the excellence of each be built.

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