

Meeting Challenges Collaboratively:

A Multi-Institutional Approach to Online Student Services that Works!

Presented by Diane Goldsmith and Catherine Manly at the NERCOMP 2003 Annual Conference.

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Introduction

Collaborative approaches to providing online services present challenges at both the consortial and institutional level. When working with a consortium, institutions are required to think and act outside their own institutional boundaries and search for solutions that serve both their needs and the needs of their peers. The institution is challenged by the need to put these ideas into practice even if they fall somewhat outside the established institutional culture. Overcoming these hurdles allows institutions to provide services to students in new ways and beyond means otherwise possible. For example, it can allow institutions to respond to the increasing student demand for student service assistance online 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. The CTDLC-member institutions participating in two grant projects have faced these challenges in three initiatives: creating a collaborative online tutoring center, developing an electronic portfolio platform, and designing a technology literacy assessment for incoming students.

In this discussion of meeting challenges collaboratively, we will be examining the process, lessons, and successes from two perspectives—that of the statewide consortium which has spearheaded the process in Connecticut and that of one institution which has been involved in this process of providing a multi-institutional approach to online student services. Diane Goldsmith is Dean of Planning, Research, and Assessment at the Connecticut Distance Learning Consortium and directs both of these grant projects as part of the CTDLC's student services initiatives. Catherine Manly is the Director of Distance Learning at Manchester Community College and serves as Manchester's Project Director for both the CTDLC-Davis and the U.S. Department of Education FIPSE funded initiatives. Throughout this document where we speak from the perspective of the **CTDLC** or of **MCC** specifically, we indicate that in bold at the beginning of the comments.

Collaboration in Connecticut

Connecticut has not had a strong history of collaboration in higher education. This is true even within systems such as the 12-institution Community College System or the 4-institution State University System. One illustration of this is the state's investments in new student information systems. The Community College system bought one instance of SCT Banner and immediately put up 13 firewalls, including one for the system office, to separate institutional data. The Connecticut State University System, bought 5 instances of SCT Banner, including one for their system office. The University of Connecticut went in a completely different direction, purchasing

PeopleSoft. In addition, the private institutions have gone in individual directions either buying or creating their own SIS. Most of these institutions, with the exception of UConn, are reasonably small, dependent on state budgets and/or tuition and fees for support. These choices all demonstrate a lack of coordinated planning.

The formation of the CTDLC has served as a catalyst for collaboration in the Connecticut higher education landscape in such a neutral way that institutions are now working together on joint projects that might have been thought impossible just a few years ago. The burgeoning culture of collaboration fostered by the CTDLC is changing the basis of inter-institutional conversation, and working together has become less of a foreign concept for many. In fact, some who are new to the state in the last few years, like Catherine Manly and Manchester's Dean of Academic Affairs Alice Savage, have the impression that a firm basis for collaboration now exists in the state. Dean Savage indicates that in her experience, "People here assume collaboration is a good thing... It is assumed that the CTDLC is there working with us."* These strides have taken a number of years to develop, but have led to the collaborative grant projects discussed here.

The importance of the independence of the CTDLC should not be underestimated when looking at the development of collaborative efforts in the state. In 1998 the Connecticut Distance Learning Consortium (CTDLC) was created, not by the Department of Higher Education, the legislature or any of the existing state systems, but by Charter Oak State College, a small public college designed to help adult learners with past college credits earn a degree. Charter Oak students could combine credits from a variety of sources including courses taken at accredited institutions in or out of Connecticut. Increasingly these students were using out-of-state distance education courses to complete their degrees. Charter Oak pulled together representatives from all higher education institutions in Connecticut with the idea of stimulating and coordinating the growth of online courses. Eventually the CTDLC became a state agency under the same Board of Directors as Charter Oak. Thus while the CTDLC is part of Connecticut's public higher education system it is outside of any of the established systems, outside of the State Department of Higher Education, not linked to the flagship University, and includes private institutions as well as all of the public state schools.

Member institutions like Manchester Community College do not perceive that the CTDLC is pushing a specific agenda, and Dean of Information Resources and Technology Tom White-Hassler believes that "schools are not suspicious of the CTDLC or their motives." CTDLC brings a perspective that is viewed as non-institutional and therefore it has become an effective impartial advocate for all participating members. This "outsider" status in the culture of Connecticut's higher education ended up being an advantage as the CTDLC began to look at how to provide quality services for students online.

The CTDLC had another advantage when it began – money. Connecticut had a large budget surplus, and for several years, the CTDLC was allocated money by the legislature which it turned around and gave out as grants for online course development, program development, workforce development, and technology training initiatives. Despite initial resistance and suspicion about the CTDLC, all the higher education institutions in Connecticut, except one, joined the Consortium because it made them eligible for grants up to \$50,000. The Consortium had an Executive Committee with representatives from the various constituencies, including the public systems and the private sector, but more importantly it had a Membership Council largely made up of distance education coordinators who met bimonthly. Over the years, many of these

* Quotes from individuals at Manchester Community College are taken from personal interviews conducted by Catherine Manly the week prior to the NERCOMP 2003 Annual Conference.

members formed strong working relationships with each other and with the CTDLC. Because the CTDLC provides a unique opportunity for sharing information statewide, members naturally network and find synergies and behaviors that would otherwise not be imagined.

The CTDLC provides a venue for institutions to outsource services and combine efforts, such as consolidating purchasing power when that makes sense. These arrangements have increased the level of trust between the CTDLC and member institutions, providing another basis on which to build further collaborative projects. Institutional leaders recognize the benefits of economies of scale and the financial sense it makes to look for places where administrative overhead can be consolidated and where collaborations make services possible that might otherwise be difficult or impossible to provide. Grant funding is one way to explore new initiatives, and granting agencies look favorably upon the cross section of institutional types that the CTDLC involves.

Although institutions participate in the CTDLC in order to be eligible for grant dollars and to be able to outsource services, a major benefit of membership in the Consortium is that it provides a focal point for collaboration. According to Dean White-Hassler, the Consortium provides “a vehicle to pursue dreams... It’s the right way to do things.” The CTDLC resources can be brought to bear to initiate and shepherd collaborative efforts such as the grant projects discussed below. For example, during the first year of the Davis Foundation grant, a successful model of collaboration was developed and refined, based on the working relationships formed through the CTDLC’s connections with member institutions. Participants found that working together allowed the group to create an online tutoring program that met the needs of all and was superior to what any could have done individually. This model is being used to begin an extended collaboration in additional areas through the FIPSE grant.

CTDLC-Davis Grant

In the Spring of 2000, research done by the Connecticut Distance Learning Consortium as part of its participation in the Federal Financial Aid Demonstration Project indicated that while many institutions had devoted time and resources to putting courses and programs online, online students had little access to support services such as tutoring, advising, and career counseling without coming to campus. In order to help institutions develop services for online students that were robust, cost effective and of high quality, the CTDLC wrote a grant to the Davis Foundation to design and implement a series of collaborative solutions for online student services. The Davis Foundation funded the participation of 4 baccalaureate-granting institutions, each receiving \$12,500 for each of three years. The CTDLC used budget surplus dollars to invite 4 community colleges to become part of this initiative, offering them \$12,500 for each of two years until the budget surplus disappeared. It is not clear at this point how the end of grant funding for the third year at a time of budget cuts will affect the continued participation of the community colleges.

The initial participating institutions in the Davis Project included Charter Oak State College, the Connecticut State University System, Manchester Community College, Naugatuck Valley Community College, Northwestern Community College, Sacred Heart University, Teikyo Post University, and Three Rivers Community College. These consortium partners, which include public, private, 2-year, and 4-year institutions, each designated a project director, and these 8 institutional project directors focused on a collaborative response to the tutoring needs of online students. Early on the group agreed not to contract with a service for tutors because they believed their students would be better served by using the staffing resources of the institutions. They also felt it was important for the institutions to feel direct ownership of the project. The CTDLC did, however, contract with Smarthinking for the use of their online tutoring platform and training.

Each institution involved in the pilot is in charge of hiring and supervising their tutors as well as publicizing the service and providing students with instructions for logging in and using the system. The CTDLC coordinates the program, which includes planning the training, scheduling, and monitoring the tutoring.

In the first semester, the Fall of 2001, six participating institutions and the CSU system offered writing tutoring to students in online classes. Tutoring is provided collaboratively, with tutors from all participating institutions available online to assist students from any of those institutions. In the second semester the pilot grew to offer online tutoring in math and accounting as well, which expanded the service to include both synchronous and asynchronous tutoring. Mid-semester the pilot expanded to all students, including those in on-campus classes. During the Fall of 2002, the tutoring subjects included writing, math, accounting, computer basics, biology, psychology, and sociology. Biology was subsequently dropped due to low student interest, but may be reinstated later if there is increased interest by participating institutions. By this time, other institutions had become interested in the project and a fee structure was established for non-grantees, with seven additional institutions paying to join the collaboration. Now in our fourth semester, 17 institutions are collectively offering 110 hours of tutoring a week in writing and 5 subject areas. Students can receive tutoring online in the evenings and on weekends, which is more complete coverage than any single institution could provide.

Lessons Learned from the CTDLC-Davis Grant

Collaborators learned several very valuable lessons from the first pilot semesters of the tutoring project. The Consortium's viewpoint, as described by Diane Goldsmith, is indicated by the label **CTDLC** preceding comments. An institutional viewpoint, as described by Catherine Manly following a number of interviews with people at Manchester Community College the week prior to the NERCOMP 2003 Annual Conference, is indicated by the label **MCC** preceding comments.

Lesson: Collaboration Can Be Valuable

CTDLC: We discovered that collaboration worked. Together we created a quality service that was probably better than any one of us could have designed separately. We grew to trust each other, to listen to each other's ideas, and to compromise knowing that each of the 8 institutions had its own culture. This process was helped by the fact that most of the Project Directors had served together on the CTDLC Membership Council, by the level of trust that had grown between the institutions and the CTDLC, and by the institutions having maintained control and ownership of the project.

MCC: At an institutional level, we learned that collaboration on large projects across institutions can foster collaboration among divisions within a given campus. The online tutoring project brought together people in student services/tutoring, technology/distance learning, as well as faculty. The grant project focused institutional energy. This encouraged campus conversation as well as expansive thinking across the institution about new approaches to providing services.

The scope of the service provided by the grant project goes beyond what would be possible for us without the collaboration. We would not be able to provide evening and weekend online tutoring without this project, and according to Dean of Student Affairs Alfred Carter, participating in the collaboration means that online tutoring is "more accessible and more efficient" and "brings home the need to provide services to the total student." Without the collaborative effort, while we

might be providing assistance to students over email in some subjects, we would not be providing as extensive an online service, including live online tutoring sessions.

Institutions participating in collaborations need to be prepared to compromise, but the process of working through differences can create a stronger outcome that challenges assumptions and benefits the whole. Manchester's Director of the Center for Student Development Voncille Wright indicates that in a project involving multiple institutions, "When you're dealing with 'like' institutions there's one set of dynamics, but when you're dealing with different institutions with different missions, a different dynamic takes place. For example, the credentials of the tutors were an issue" across two-year and four-year institutions that had to be worked out across the institution types. "Such a collaboration may have been started with like institutions, but the benefits of working with non-like institutions outweigh those" of working only with similar institutions.

Lesson: Incentives are Important

CTDLC: We learned that money helps as an incentive for institutions to participate in collaborative projects. Grant dollars served as a motivator and enabler for institutions on otherwise tight budgets to expand their horizons. Individuals might be willing, but outside money provided the institutional impetus to participate. However incentives alone were not enough. Some institutions turned down the opportunity of participating in the project despite the money offered. It was not clear if they didn't see the advantages of collaborating, didn't see the CTDLC as a neutral party, or weren't significantly focused as an institution on the changes being affected by distance education.

MCC: Campuses recognize the need for experimentation, but it takes more than good will to move forward even in good budget times. The grant allowed individuals to be trained in new tutoring technologies and to put that training into practice. The new approach could be tested at the campus level by relying upon grant resources, which meant it has been possible to experiment despite tight budgets.

Lesson: Project Directors have a Key Role

CTDLC: The Institutional Project Directors made an enormous difference in how successfully the tutoring project was integrated into the institutions. In some institutions the Project Director was the Dean in charge of online learning (in whatever form that took). They had a lot of direct and indirect control over the institution's entire online enterprise and therefore were able to make and implement decisions. However, in some cases the Dean in charge of online learning was in a different division than, for example, the tutoring center. In this case, being Dean didn't necessarily make access easier. In one case the Project Director was in the system office which made access to faculty and campus departments even more difficult. Most of the other Project Directors were Distance Learning Coordinators whose power to affect institutional change was indirect and to a large degree dependent on their connections with faculty, staff, and administrators, their knowledge of their campus culture, the respect with which they were held, and their ability to use all of that to move projects. The Project Director role is absolutely critical and the the CTDLC had little or no say in who each institution selected.

MCC: At Manchester, the Project Director is the Director of Distance Learning, a position that has to work across the organization through influence rather than authority. According to Dean Carter, "The person who coordinates the project [at an institution like Manchester] has to be able

to move throughout the campus, maintain credibility, and create a learning community. That person has to understand the need to bring a team together without alienation and to get individuals on campus who participate through the learning curve in order to deliver the services.”

Lesson: Involve Institutional Stakeholders Early

CTDLC: It was essential to involve the person at the institution who was in charge of tutoring services from the beginning of the project. They needed to be invested and feel that they had ownership of the program. We found that there was very little use of our online tutoring services at the institutions where the coordinator wasn't involved, where the coordinator felt no excitement or interest in the program, or where the coordinator felt that what we were providing was unwanted competition (rather than an augmentation) to the onsite tutoring program. It was also helpful if the tutoring coordinator had a good working relationship with the Institutional Project Director. This not only provided them with an ally but also linked the tutoring and online learning programs together. Having the support of their supervisors and others at the institution was advantageous.

MCC: At an institutional level, involving the person in charge of tutoring, Director Wright, was essential to making the project work. She backed the project, understood its experimental nature, advertised the service to students, identified interested tutors, and made sure that tutoring subject coordinators at the institution were involved. This project has moved the institution beyond providing static information on web pages and minimal email-based tutoring. The institution now has trained online tutors in three subjects and our students have online tutoring available to them in more subjects through the collaboration. Director Wright also involved the secretary of the College Learning Center who would become the first contact for students at the institution, and she suggests that this be done “as soon as possible” during the formation of such a project.

Lesson: Focus on the Students

CTDLC: We spent most of our collective time selecting a tutoring platform, choosing the subjects in which we would provide tutoring, debating how many hours of tutoring we should offer, creating elaborate formula to ensure fairness (X amount of tutoring hours = Y amount of student access to tutors per institution). We did not spend nearly enough time or energy figuring out how to get students to use the tutoring services. We built it and they didn't come. We discovered that in many institutions faculty who taught online were not even aware of the service. Faculty who were aware and thought the service was valuable were the strongest implementers of the project. They directed or required students to use the service. We are still learning how to better involve and inform faculty.

MCC: According to Director Wright, “Up front marketing is extremely important.” The greatest demonstrated student interest initially came from students in classes where faculty explained the service and encouraged students to use it, but this was highly dependent on the particular interests of the faculty members. Faculty advertising seems to be an effective method of getting students to learn about the service, but we continue to look for and pursue other avenues of advertising as well. We have announced it at new student orientation sessions, placed posters in the tutoring area and around campus, discussed it during in-class presentations about tutoring opportunities, asked faculty to post information on their course websites, placed information on the campus website, and held information sessions for faculty. It is important to have good documentation for students so that when they choose to get started, what they need to do is explained clearly to them. We have seen usage go up across the pilot semesters as students learn about the service, so

over time word of the new service does seem to be spreading. However, it would have been helpful to focus on attracting students earlier since participation rates will impact funding beyond the grant. The community colleges need to identify non-grant funding a year earlier than anticipated due to the elimination of the last year of grant funds. This is a more significant challenge due to the lack of emphasis on student usage early in the project.

Lesson: Online Services Are Used By Everyone

CTDLC: We found that we couldn't just create an online service for online students. If an online student could log in at 2pm on Saturday and get help on their math homework, the on-campus student wanted the same access. Additionally some of the institutions involved, particularly those who offered fewer online classes and had fewer students attending solely at a distance, strongly advocated for this change. We very quickly found that we needed to create online student services with both the online and on-campus student in mind.

MCC: In addition to both online and on-campus students desiring the service, offering the service to all students fit with our institutional direction regarding online services. Our online registration is open to all students, for example, so specifying that online tutoring was just for online students was not in line with our institutional perspective. Our College Learning Center (which offers tutoring) deals with the campus as a whole, and it made little sense to pursue a collaborative approach to online tutoring for online students but a separate approach for on-campus students. It also made advertising to students and faculty more straightforward because the service was available to everyone.

Lesson: Overall Coordination is Important

CTDLC: The tasks of coordinating the tutoring project have grown enormously. The CTDLC has used some of the Davis grant funds to hire a part time coordinator for the project. She has improved the quality of the service dramatically, but it is a considerable added expense. When we created the project, we outlined a fee structure to maintain this position after the grant. However, with the dramatic changes in the economy, it is not clear exactly how this position will be sustained after next year when the grant funding has run out.

MCC: The CTDLC provides an invaluable service by coordinating this effort, and their neutral middle role means that institutions feel that compromises that are made get done with the good of the whole firmly in mind. In Director Wright's view, "a project like this definitely needs a point guard orchestrating everything... acting as the heart of the project" and the CTDLC's coordinator "has been wonderful" in that role. The CTDLC's vested interest is that the service function well and be of high-quality, and they make sure that participants work together toward this goal.

Lesson: Institutional Ownership is Important

CTDLC: The largest frustration for the CTDLC was the fact that we had no control or power over what happened within each institution. We worked very hard to ensure that the institutions "owned" the project, but at times that could be incredibly frustrating. For example, as part of making students aware of the project, we wanted better information about the service on each institution's web site since online students would use the institution's web site as one way to get information about what was available to them. We discovered that in many cases getting changes made in a web site was very difficult. In most cases the project directors had little input into what was on the web site, and there was a bureaucratic process that had to be finessed in order to make

changes or add information. In many cases this was a lengthy process. We also had no power over who was appointed as the Project Director or in whether the institution really bought into and got excited about what we were doing.

MCC: The importance of institutional ownership focuses ultimately on sustainability; it is the institutions who will sustain the project by funding the tutors once the grant runs out. If a particular individual thinks the project has merit, but support throughout the institution is missing, then it is not likely that the project will last past the grant funds. However, when people throughout the school understand and value the service, then it is more likely that the pilot will be successful and that support will last beyond outside funding. Online tutoring is a new service that is still proving its value and finding its place within the institution, so what happens after grant funding is still undetermined.

Continuing Collaborative Efforts with Other Projects (FIPSE Grant)

Carefully Choose Collaborative Projects

CTDLC: Working on the Davis grant, we also discovered that collaborative solutions weren't always the answer. While the group initially thought about creating a collaborative solution for advising, especially since about 30% of Connecticut's online students said they were taking courses at institutions where they weren't matriculated, it became clear that no one felt that establishing a collaborative advising center made sense from an institutional, staffing, or cost perspective. In addition it was always clear that the issues of outcomes assessment (also part of the Davis grant) had to be institution-specific. It was at this point that we realized that while a collaborative solution such as the tutoring center would not work for advising and assessment, creating collaborative tools to aid institutions in these areas would be very useful. Our FIPSE initiative was designed with that in mind. We created an initiative to collaboratively design one electronic portfolio platform and one instrument to assess technology literacy which institutions could use in individual ways to meet their specific needs.

Gestation of an Idea

MCC: The Davis grant conversations around the areas of advising and outcomes brought together people on the Manchester campus and helped formulate the ideas that were the basis for the directions ultimately followed by the FIPSE grant. Our deans were encouraging collaboration across college divisions and charged a group of representatives from various areas to think expansively about new possibilities that matched the college's strategic directions, particularly related to advising. They suggested using the vehicle of writing a FIPSE grant to move those conversations forward, knowing that starting projects is generally expensive and grant funding would be logical to pursue. The Davis grant ideas acted as a catalyst, as some individuals who were involved in aspects of the Davis grant were also involved in these conversations on our campus.

Manchester has been working on improving its academic advising and was interested in working on this collaboratively across the student affairs and academic affairs divisions of the college. It was already the case that the Davis grant was encouraging participating institutions to look at places where cross-institutional efforts might be beneficial in the areas of both advising and outcomes assessment. It seemed a natural extension of this work to look at building an electronic

portfolio that would serve as an aggregation point for student information (for advising) and work (for assessment).

Conversations also coalesced around the ability of our students to use technology that was increasingly becoming expected, and the need to assist students who would otherwise be at a disadvantage. We still have a few incoming students who indicate to us that they have never used a computer before (for example, in a survey of 255 incoming students in January 2003 two students indicated this) and a few of our faculty report that they receive typewritten or handwritten papers from several students a semester. In other instances, faculty report that a few students have dropped classes when they found out about the technological requirements for a course. Many faculty are now using technological components within their courses or require assignments that use technology. While faculty have provided in-class assistance to students in the past, the pervasiveness of technology use and the dwindling number of students unfamiliar with using a computer means that the use of computer technology is becoming an expected part of a college education. It would be helpful for students who do not have experience with computers to be identified early on and offered assistance through the institution in order to learn basic skills. This will allow faculty to focus on course content and only assist students with technology components specific to the course. It will also allow the institution to appropriately assist students trying to use online-based student services such as online registration, checking grades online, contacting college personnel via email, or (importantly in the context of the FIPSE grant conversations) use an electronic portfolio system.

The Davis grant model seemed to be an appropriate one for the projects we were discussing and the CTDLC seemed to be in a perfect central location to pull together multiple institutions on short notice, both to draw interest from granting agencies and to help ensure that the initiative succeeds. We approached the CTDLC with the idea of expanding on the Davis initiative and to our delight they took the idea and turned it into a reality. From our perspective, bringing in the CTDLC to expand the scope of the project beyond our institutional boundaries made the FIPSE funding possible. It would have been impossible to generate the necessary interest across multiple institutions in the short time frame we had without the collaborative framework in place already and without the connections that the CTDLC had across institutions. Simply put, collaborating through the CTDLC made sense.

FIPSE Grant

CTDLC: The successful model of cross-institutional collaboration used to develop the online tutoring service is now being extended through the support of the FIPSE grant to additional projects, including building an electronic portfolio for both advising and outcomes assessment purposes, as well as developing a technology literacy assessment for incoming students. The CTDLC invited 7 of the original 8 Davis participants to be part of the FIPSE project (the system office was felt to be too far removed from the campuses to implement this successfully), and after soliciting proposals, 4 other institutions were asked to join this new collaboration, including Capital Community College, Quinnipiac University, Tunxis Community College, and the University of Connecticut Bachelor of General Studies (BGS).

Applying Davis Lessons to FIPSE

As outlined above, we learned a series of valuable lessons during our first year of the Davis grant, and, as is often the case, we may have learned more from our mistakes than from our successes.

Starting with the planning process that led to our writing the grant, we have tried to incorporate those lessons into this new project from the beginning of our work. We have put special emphasis on trying to ensure institution-wide buy in, getting the people with the appropriate skills and influence to be involved in the project, and focusing from the beginning on how students will use the products and processes we are designing.

Lesson: Collaboration Can Be Valuable

The 7 institutions who are working together on the CTDLC-Davis grant project have seen the positive results of such collaboration. They have learned how to work together well, and their trust level continues to grow as the project continues to be successful. For this reason, we felt it was essential to invite this core of institutions to be part of the FIPSE grant, even as we added several new participants. They have provided a strong model of collaborative processes for the new institutions which has allowed these projects to move forward faster and more concretely than would have happened if we were beginning this process anew.

Lesson: Incentives are important

For the FIPSE project there were much smaller institutional grants than for the Davis project--about \$4,000 a year for each institution as compensation for staff time. Yet all of the current Davis participants were eager to participate. While it is clear that institutions need a financial incentive to participate, participants also understand the considerable savings to a single institution that these types of collaborative projects offer. In addition to coordination, the CTDLC is providing the technical expertise to design and program the two projects; they will buy and host the servers; and maintain a help desk for technical support for students using them. Additionally, FIPSE is viewed as a very prestigious grant and participating in it is important to many institutions.

Lesson: Project Directors Have a Key Role

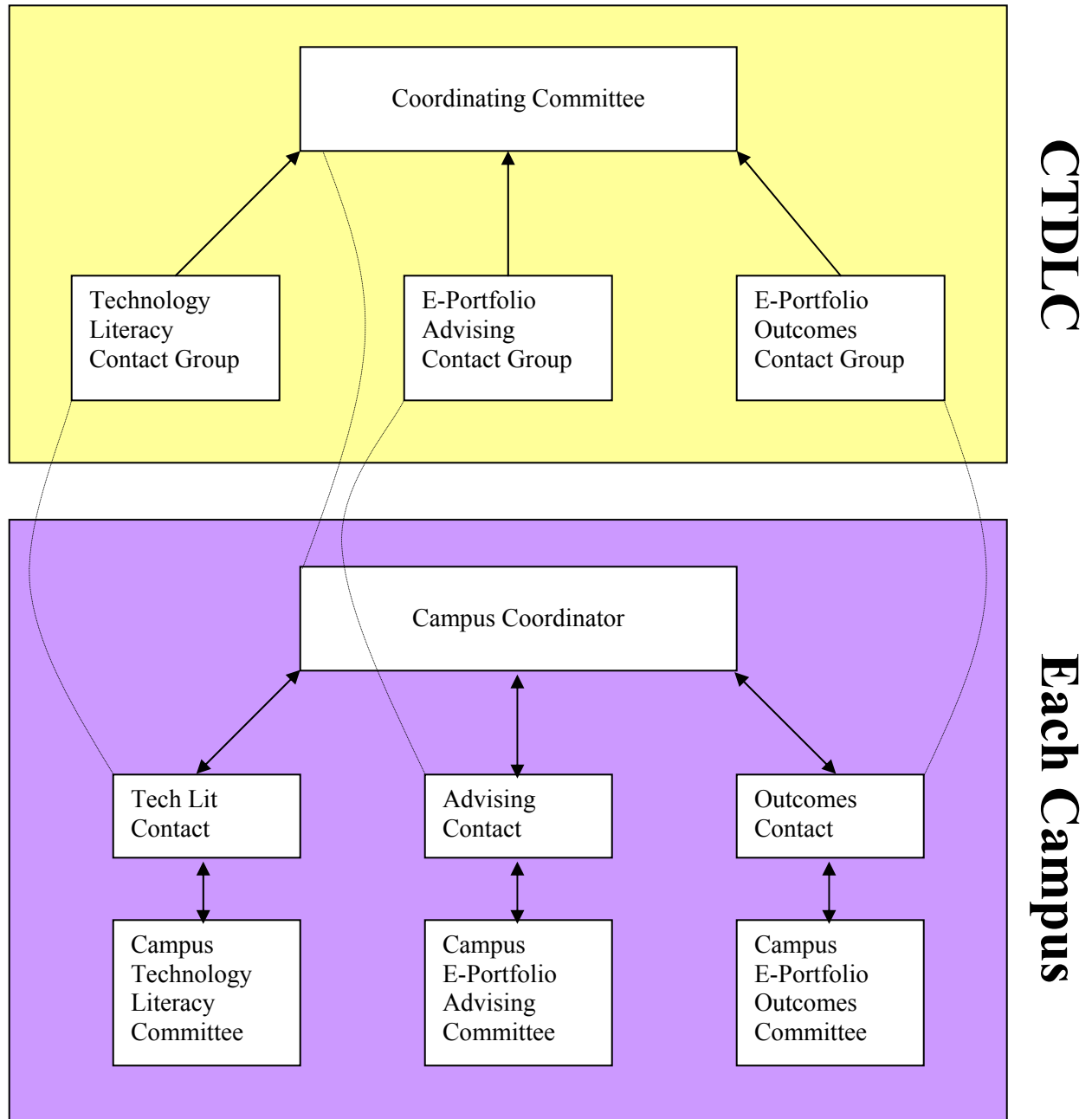
Based on our Davis grant experience, we visualized a model where there would be a Project Director and several committee members from each institution – faculty or staff from the institution who were most involved in the various aspects of the project including advising, outcomes assessment, and technical literacy. The Project Director would function both as the institutional representative to the project and as the project leader within the institution. From our work on the CTDLC-Davis project we knew that this role was key to the success of the project. Therefore, in a few cases we tried to influence who the institution appointed as Project Director. In one case this was successful and in another it was not, which illustrates one of the disadvantages the CTDLC has in being outside the institution.

Lesson: Involve Institutional Stakeholders Early

We knew that the success of this project was heavily dependent on how well the electronic portfolio and technical literacy assessment are integrated into the institution. From the beginning we wanted to encourage the idea of institutional ownership and institutional responsibility for implementation. We wanted everyone who would be touched by the project to be aware of it ahead of time. Therefore, in order for an institution to join the project, we required signatures from all who would be involved including the Project Director, the institutional researcher, the chief academic officer, the distance learning coordinator, the President, and contacts for the grant committee areas. We have also tried to increase initial institutional involvement by encouraging the Project Director and committee members to set up committees at their institution to provide

guidance for them. (See structure chart, next page. Curved lines indicate connections between work at the Consortium level and that at the institutional level.) We asked them to bring to their institution questions about the functionality of the electronic portfolio and we surveyed all faculty and staff about technical literacy. We believe this has improved institutional buy in.

Structure for FIPSE Grant



Lesson: Focus on the Students

Trying to learn from our most difficult issue in the Davis project, we are specifically beginning our discussion about the electronic portfolio and the technical literacy assessment with the issue of implementation. We are discussing questions such as, who will be in charge of the implementation? Who will use the e-portfolio or the technology assessment? How will they be trained? How will students learn about it? We are asking all institutions to develop plans for using the e-portfolio and the technology assessment at the same time as we begin to design them. We want to ensure that the users are ready when the portfolio and the assessment instruments are ready.

Lesson: Online Services Are Used By Everyone

Unlike the Davis project, we began the FIPSE project acknowledging that we are designing the technology literacy assessment tool and the e-portfolio platform with both online and on-campus users in mind. Therefore the assessment tool will be available at home as well as in testing centers. Training for the e-portfolio is being designed for both the online and onsite user.

Lesson: Overall Coordination is Important

Finally, the central coordination provided by the CTDLC continues to act as a motivator and critical component in making these projects cost-effective. The grant allows the CTDLC to devote a considerable amount of resources to this project. The CTDLC focuses thought around areas of common function and neutrally facilitates value identification despite the individual agendas institutions may bring to the table.

Making Collaborative Efforts Work

Here is a summary of the aspects we feel are the most important for making collaborative efforts such as those we are engaged in work smoothly.

- **Plan Wisely:** When choosing collaborative projects, the benefits need to exist and be made clear. Ask the following questions. Does the project meet a previously unmet need? Does it do so by consolidating resources? Will it benefit from multiple minds working on it? Does it have someone to champion it? If these things are the case, then it might be a good candidate for collaboration.
- **Foster Good Communication:** Fostering communication between potential partners ahead of time means that a communication structure is already in place when collaborative opportunities arise. The personalities involved have a lot to do with making the collaboration function smoothly. In our case the participants are genuinely interested in working together, in listening and incorporating others' ideas, and are willing to make concessions to the greater good (especially when it is clear how the greater good is shaped and that all interests are being balanced).
- **Define the Scope of the Project Clearly:** Having clearly defined projects is also helpful in making the collaboration work. Each institution and the individuals involved have their own agendas, and that could lead to chaos. However, defining the scope of the project up front through a collaborative process means that everyone involved knows where the

project is going and is willing to make compromises to move the project along. A clear understanding of the project's scope also aids in focusing on the issues of institutional implementation from the beginning of the project.

- **Use Neutral Leadership:** The leadership from the individuals at the CTDLC is also critical to making the collaboration work. The project management offered by the CTDLC means that projects move forward with all institutions getting equal weight and that meetings are productive despite individual agendas that sometimes come through vociferously and that might otherwise derail an effort.
- **Foster Buy-in At All Levels of Each Institution:** The director of the CTDLC has been able to get institutional buy-in from the top of the participating institutions, which means that the individuals involved have support from their institutions. The institutions have included participation of the key stakeholders at each campus. This includes people from multiple areas, such as with the electronic portfolio project. Each campus has been specifically encouraged to create campus committees to discuss the projects and generate support and conversation about the projects throughout each campus.
- **Choose Change Agents as Project Directors:** It is important that the institutions choose representatives for these projects who will be taken seriously and can play the role of change agent at their institution. These projects all represent changes in procedures at the institutions, and those involved throughout the institution must be brought on board in order for the efforts to work, especially if they are to work beyond the grant funding.

Looking forward

We are now one semester into the FIPSE project and three semesters into the Davis project and we continue to believe that collaboration among highly dissimilar institutions enables us to create high quality online services for students at a considerable cost savings. However, there are many significant challenges ahead.

- **Sustainability:** We have not yet faced the challenge of transitioning from grant funding to institutional support with these projects. Budgets are shrinking; grants are drying up. On the one hand this makes it more difficult to find money for new projects and for institutions to assume the costs of these new projects. On the other hand, it is exactly at this time that looking for collaborative cost saving solutions makes the most sense. The Davis grant ends in 2004 and the FIPSE grant in 2005. We are just beginning to think about new ways of establishing and sustaining these types of projects if new money does not become available.
- **Number of Institutions:** We worked with 8 institutions in the Davis grant and expanded that to 11 for the FIPSE project. Our intention is to work with a small number of institutions in the creation and pilot stage and then invite other institutions to join us, possibly at a cost (as is true now with the tutoring project). This raises some interesting questions. Is there a critical mass of institutions that are needed to create this type of collaborative solution? Can there be too large a group? Does working across public, private, two- and four-year institutions all at once help or hinder the process? What do we do about the few institutions that are nominally part of the project, but not really contributing either to the collaboration or to involving their staff and faculty in the work that is being done?

- **Changing Participants:** We have been lucky to have a group of project directors who have worked together for several years. However, retirements, new job opportunities, and budget cuts have and will affect who is sitting around the table in the future. We are not sure yet how that will affect the work we are doing.

We assume the strong collaborative work we have done on these two grant projects will provide a strong base as we meet challenges in the future. However, we also know that there will be other lessons to learn and incorporate into our future work.

More information about the Davis-CTDLC Quality Initiative can be found at <http://www.ctdlc.org/Evaluation/grants-Davis.html>

More information about the FIPSE Grant Funded Project can be found at <http://www.ctdlc.org/Evaluation/grants-FIPSE.html>