By Diane Balestri

Collaborations Great and Small

Collaboration is on everybody’s tongue these days. It’s even becoming such a cliché that new terms are coined and old ones repurposed 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 up 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.”

June complex. Collaboration is co-branding... Let’s keep that idea in mind.

Collaboration becomes especially seductive to contemplate whenever costs and expenditures, to say nothing of their inordinate risk, are high and expertise is scarce. Infor- mation 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 technologies that can place them on a handle on the cost of maintaining their current IT environments, and may 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 in- creasingly high 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 technology trends. As we engage 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 collabora- tions, 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 expose a common goal. Other barriers are organizational, ranging from cultural clashes and hierarchies that separate the partners to an 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 com- mon 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, we should adopt the highly interconnected, more interactive, and, unfortunately, expensive environment now being created with information technologies, isola- tion 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 elabo- rate activities involved in partnerships and consortial arrangements with other institutions. Intrainstitutional collabora- tions are not especially hard to de- velop, but they require leadership, pa- tience, 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 experi- ence 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 interinstitutional partnerships have focused on developing or improving academic programs and until recently regarding IT would “Wal- Mart-ize” small colleges, rendering them small and fragile in a highly competitive group but ultimately indiscernible from one another. For me, the answer is straightforward: “Won’t happen.” Information technol- ogies as they emerge. We need to plan for the next generation of IT infrastructure and services that will be needed by all small colleges but that will probably not be afford- able for most.

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