“Collaboration is hard,” said Penn State University senior director John T. Harwood at the NLII annual meeting in San Diego, “but none of us can flourish alone.” Nice words, but how do universities overcome their natural balkanizing, competitive, we-can-do-it-better-than-anyone instincts to form cooperative, mutually beneficial relationships with other institutions?

Sharing wisdom from their book *Partnering in the Learning Marketspace*, authors Ann-Hill Duin and Linda Baer took charge of that complicated and controversial topic in their featured session titled Developing Successful Partnership Investment Portfolios. Quoting Cisco Systems CEO John Chambers, the authors served up a vision of partnership based on a sound business model: shared vision, geographic proximity, and similar cultures paired with short-term gains for all stakeholders in the relationship make the partnership formula successful. Universities must assess their own willingness to take risks, they said, and then dive in, fully aware of the legal and financial implications while still acknowledging the experimental nature of strategic partnerships.

Bruce Chaloux, director of the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB), highlighted the success of this unique compact between 325 southern colleges and universities that currently covers 16 states and offers 7,000 credit courses and more than 250 degree programs. Founded in 1998 with just 45 institutions, this interstate partnership creates an academic free trade zone in the southern states: Colleges share courses and programs. A single portal stitches the campuses together, providing an easy-to-access list of e-courses. Students pay a common electronic tuition rate. The final package, says Chaloux, opens access to education to a much larger pool of students—especially to disadvantaged students—while creating a regional marketplace for electronic courses.

Sharing technology also can create problems between schools. With Linux revolutionizing the operating system marketplace, an open-source debate is under way in academia: If OKI and MERLOT serve up spectacular databases of images, documents, tests, and lessons free of charge on the Internet, why is it still so difficult for colleges and universities to exchange technological ideas? Penn State dove headfirst into this shark pit last year when it chose to adopt OnCourse (http://oncourse.iu.edu)—a course management system pioneered by Indiana University—Purdue University at Indianapolis. Harwood and IUPUI professor Ali Jafari joined forces in a session titled How to Solve the Not-Invented-Here Syndrome to describe the drama that preceded the partnership: setting up the ingenious template-based system was a simple copy-and-paste procedure; convincing the institution to adopt and use it was another matter. Penn State’s resident techies complained they could build a better system and not everyone on the faculty was thrilled with the new, alien system. To combat that resistance, Harwood adopted a consortial relationship with the faculty that took a streamlined, tech-savvy, ego-free approach to the problem: control costs, retrofit existing tools to teaching environments, and, most important, keep the focus on teaching priorities rather than on the technology.

A variety of other partnerships were placed under the microscope at the NLII meeting: In a session titled Institutional Partnerships for Excellence in Online Learning:
A Case Study, college administrators Susan Bray and Kim A. Scalzo from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute discussed their institution’s relationship with General Motors Corp. to provide GM employees with courses on managing the workplace in a cross-cultural environment. Representatives from the University of Wisconsin system showcased their statewide initiative for supporting e-learning at ITS@Wisconsin: Education Serving Education (http://its.wisconsin.edu/). And in a session titled Innovations in Institutional Cooperation for Online Learning Materials, two presenters from the University of Waterloo revealed how they’ve encouraged professors to use learning objects not generated within the university environment.

A few presenters were willing to discuss business models for their partnership ideas. In terms of ROI, William Graves, founder of Eduprise (www.eduprise.com), challenged participants in his session—titled the Role of IT and Partnering in Creating New Educational Wealth—to consider measuring wealth in educational terms, pointing to the many social and educational benefits that will attend the successful application of technology to an academic environment. In a session titled E-Extension/USA: Teaching an Old Dog New Tricks, David King, executive director of Indiana Higher Education Telecommunication Systems, laid out plans to use the Land-Grant University (LGU) system pioneered in Indiana 90 years ago as a model for online educational services. King discussed the role of LGUs as the first U.S. distance-learning network by sending agents out into communities to assess learning needs while providing access to education for an unprecedented number of people in the Midwest. Holding out his vision for the continued democratizing of education, King illuminated his plans to build on the LGU system by using the connectivity of the Internet to reach an even wider audience. “We are in a new age of mentoring in the style of Socrates,” King said. “It’s no longer the big eating the small; it’s the fast eating the slow. Speed of response is rewarded.”

**Partnering to be Key NLII Theme**

Partnering in the learning marketspace has been a key NLII 2000–2001 theme and will continue to be a key theme through 2002 because it provides new opportunities to reconfigure the way instruction is funded, developed, marketed, delivered, and supported. The NLII held a focus session on the topic (see www.educause.edu/nlii/meetings/nlii013/ for a summary of the findings) and sponsored the development of a branch of the READY system based on the book *Partnering in the Learning Marketspace* by Ann Hill Duin, Linda L. Baer, and Doreen Starke-Meyerring (www.educause.edu/ready). A white paper building on and updating the book was distributed to NLII annual meeting attendees and is available online at www.educause.edu/nlii/keythemes/developing_paper.doc.