Come Together

Campuses Find the Road to Success Lined with Partnerships and Collaborations

For years, institutions of higher education have operated in silos—both philosophically and in practice: each institution its own universe, each department its own country, each course its own state. Individualism looms large in higher education. Institutional pride is rooted in ownership. And while colleges and universities frequently eye academic and technological advancements on other campuses, enterprise-wide transformation in teaching and learning at home is stymied by the deeply rooted belief that only our institution can solve our institution’s problems.

Today campuses are finding that the only path to success is through partnerships and collaborations that will help them leverage their resources and access expertise otherwise out of reach. The result is that the not-invented-here syndrome that has dominated institutions for years is slowly unraveling, aided by fiscal constraints and new ways of doing business that are infiltrating and dismantling the silos.

Partnering is providing new opportunities for colleges and universities to reconfigure the way instruction gets funded, developed, marketed, delivered, and supported. From interinstitutional partnerships to collaborations with commercial vendors, three sessions at the NLII annual meeting looked at how relationships are making it possible for institutions to realize their academic missions in the brave new technological world.

In some cases, the roadblock to interinstitutional sharing involves neither resistance to partnerships nor technology. More often it involves administrative issues, such as student registration, grade and credit transfers, intellectual property concerns, academic calendars, and tuition sharing. Without a method for addressing and seamlessly providing those issues, progress in technology-enabled education will slow to a frustrating and
expensive crawl. In “Building Economies of Scale through Collaboration,”
(http://www.educause.edu/asp/doclib/abstract.asp?ID=NLI0304) Karen Partlow of the
Committee on Institutional Cooperation (http://www.cic.uiuc.edu/), a consortium of 12
large research universities in the Midwest, discussed the universities’ commitment to
creating an administrative solution to the problems inherent in interinstitutional course
sharing. Scheduled as a pilot for spring semester 2003, CourseShare enables participating
institutions to share (1) online courses across campuses and (2) the intellectual capital
inherent in courseware. Pilot courses include Nursing Informatics and Online Portuguese.
The system involves a set of components, agreements, and principles that facilitate the
sharing, and it’s capable of scaling to accommodate large numbers of courses. For more
information on CourseShare, see

At Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University (http://www.vt.edu/), collaboration
with municipal governments, private businesses, K–12 schools, and a local foundation in
Southside Virginia is transforming a community’s distressed economy into a vibrant hub
of intellectual currency and high-tech opportunities. It was, in the words of Ann Moore of
Virginia Tech during the session titled “Community Partners for the Knowledge Age,”
(http://www.educause.edu/asp/doclib/abstract.asp?ID=NLI0308) a “challenge to a
community’s imagination.

“What is succeeding in the new economy is around research universities,” said Moore.
“Struggling economies want research universities.” Buoyed by tobacco settlements and
the vision of a Virginia Tech alumnus from the Danville area, the university presented a
proposal to build both a technology and a human infrastructure in the region and to create
partnerships that would regenerate its economy.

Copresenter Nancy Franklin and her husband were hired to set up a learning and resource
center and to meet the challenge of turning around a community’s imagination after 50
years of operation as a tobacco-growing economy. They faced the additional challenge of setting up a university program two hours away from the university. The result is eDAN, an institute for advanced training and research that is so successful that other regions are emulating it. “Extreme backwardness is born out of the inability to act together,” said Franklin. “We needed to create an intellectual hub. A knowledge economy needs people with ideas. It requires corridors of economic activity.”

The institute is now housed in a 90,000-square-foot structure that looks and feels like a high-tech building and presents itself as a statement of hope for the region. It offers research, conference, and classroom space, with an emphasis on research, which is high on Virginia Tech’s agenda.

Now the program is becoming integrated into the community and is helping students prepare for advanced degrees. A K–12 pipeline is being built, and a new magnet high school focusing on biotechnology is on the drawing board. Virginia Tech faculty successfully developed a U.S. Department of Education grant to bring faculty to the region for integration of technology adoption. In addition, a youth development initiative is in the works. For more information on eDAN, see http://www.ecorridors.vt.edu/pilots/danville/about.shtml.

Contrary to how traditional institutions of higher education were born and raised, today’s virtual universities are more often than not children of collaboration. Western Governors University (http://www.wgu.edu/wgu/index.html), for example—the brainchild of a number of western states—offers distance-learning courses from dozens of colleges and universities nationwide. In the session titled “Statewide Virtual University in Transition,” (http://www.educause.edu/asp/doclib/abstract.asp?ID=NLI0321) Rhonda Epper of Community College of Denver (http://ccd.rightchoice.org/) presented results of the Virtual Colleges and Universities in Transition (VCU) Project, a national study of consortium-based virtual colleges and universities for helping state policy leaders better
understand and assess the role of virtual universities in meeting state education goals. Cosponsored by the State Higher Education Executive Officers (SHEEO), http://www.sheeo.org/, and the Western Cooperative for Educational Telecommunications (WCET), http://www.wcet.org/, the study asked questions about whether virtual universities should operate as separate organizational entities or whether they’re best seen as temporary, transitory instruments of change.

What the results reveal is that the goals of VCU are in transition, with increased emphasis on reducing costs, centralizing resources, creating a better-educated workforce, decreasing the emphasis on expanding access, and serving underserved populations. The study also revealed VCU’s prevailing funding models, most of which are financed by direct state appropriations, fees from services to provider institutions, tuition and fees the VCU charge, full-time-equivalent funding from states, membership fees, and donations from and partnerships with organizations in the private sector.

The survey realized a 79 percent response rate (48 out of 61 responses were received) from a mix of systemwide and statewide VCU’s. In general, respondents said they’d met their goals, but the principal investigators are still teasing out interpretations. Less than 25 percent of the respondents said their VCU were self-supporting; another 25 percent said they plan to be. For more information on the VCU Project, see http://www.sheeo.org/disted/vu-home.htm.