Institute for Academic Alliances

Occasional Papers

When is an Inter-Institutional Academic Alliance Appropriate?

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Successful inter-institutional distance education programs capitalize on the following conditions.

Pre-existing Relationships. Program administrators and/or program faculty have prior professional working relationships. Ideally, participants in the proposed partnership have previously teamed up on research projects, courses, or other professional endeavors.

Equal Partners. Faculty participants consider their counterparts at partner universities to be excellent colleagues. Ideally all faculty participants feel they are equal partners in a program venture that is better than any one of them could accomplish with their institutional colleagues and institutional resources.

Institutional Support for Faculty Participants. Faculty engaged in inter-institutional program development and delivery have informed their supervisors and have approval to participate. Ideally participants have full support of their departmental colleagues as well as appropriate academic administrators.

Management Similarities. Collaborating institutions in the inter-institutional program can create appropriate matches in terms of academic calendars, price per credit hour, inter-institutional transfer of student data, program admission requirements, etc. Ideally, institutional finance officers, distance education officers, registrars, and graduate school administrators are actively engaged in creating simple inter-institutional systems that work.

The Institute for Academic Alliances (IAA) was founded in April 2004 to encourage and assist higher education institutions to develop and deliver collaborative online academic programs. The IAA works with academic institutions to rapidly deploy innovative, high-quality collaborative academic programs in emerging fields. Since its inception, the IAA has worked with 16 higher education alliances involving over 100 higher education institutions in 37 states.

Vision. Participants in planning the inter-institutional program identify a common, compelling vision for their work together. Ideally, the academic discipline at large is extraordinarily well served by the shared vision.

Urgency. Participants share a sense of urgency about developing the curriculum, approving the curriculum on the partner campuses, marketing the program, admitting students, and assuring that excellent courses are developed, taught, and assessed. Ideally, programs move from initial planning meeting to full implementation within 18 months.

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Engaged Participants. The people who represent the partner universities as administrative and faculty participants are engaged in and supportive of the partnership program. Ideally, the partnership is led by individuals who commit to advancing their institution's stature by development of collaborative programs and who have a tendency to behave generously toward their partners.

Supportive Academic Policies. Policy, practice, and procedural scaffolding is in place at each partner university to support inter-institutional programs. Ideally this scaffolding permits partner universities to assure that institutional standards are maintained, that inter-institutional programs are not "managed by exception," and that few or no additional administrative costs are incurred.

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Supportive Student Services. Each partner supports its students in the inter-institutional program as well as it supports its on campus students. Ideally, each partner employs the services of a coordinator who assists distance students as they seek admission, enroll in courses, file for degree completion, etc—thus freeing faculty to provide academic rather than logistical support.

Institutional Culture. Campus leaders support experimentation with partnership programs as a route to mainstreaming such practices. Ideally, institutions represented within the partnership have cultures that support inter-institutional partnerships.

Attributes of Administrative Participants in Inter-Institutional Alliances

Inter-institutional programs are supported by many people at partner universities—the participating faculty and members of the alliance leadership team who experience benefits and others whose work is complicated by the demands of partnering.

An academic administrator who provides local leadership for an inter-institutional academic program needs to establish collegial working arrangements with the institution's chief financial officer, with the registrar, with the director of continuing education, and, for post-baccalaureate programs, the graduate dean and graduate faculty leadership team. Successful academic leaders of inter-institutional partnerships are strategic in their management of the following administrative tasks.

Management of faculty workloads. Structure the workloads for faculty teaching in inter-institutional programs so they remain in the good graces of their departmental colleagues and experience more rewards than costs from their participation in the inter-institutional program.

Management of program approval and review. Assure that inter-institutional programs meet or exceed departmental standards and that compliance with all program approval and review processes is achieved.

Colleague communication. Fully and frequently inform inter-institutional program faculty, their departmental colleagues, and the impacted institutional offices (finance, distance education, registration, graduate education) about program accomplishments, problems, assessment outcomes, and plans.

Policies and practices. Engage the appropriate individuals in developing policies and practices that are supportive of the inter-institutional program and its faculty and student participants.

Inter-Institutional Alliance Management

Inter-institutional distance education alliances are not self sustaining. Such alliances require leadership teams that find effective ways to work together collegially while each also works in the best interests of his/her employing institution.

Base practice on principles. By articulating core principles for working together, alliance leaders can find common ground on policies and practices. The following deceptively simple core principles have proven their merits in the work of the Great Plains IDEA—Behave as equals. Share leadership. Respect and accommodate institutional differences. Simplify student access.

Minimize what is centralized. Inter-institutional alliances have core functions such as oversight of student data exchange systems, alliance website maintenance, records management, and planning that are best centralized. Costs can be contained by distributing responsibilities for administrative support and oversight among the partner institutions.

Confront conflicts. Alliances do not advance by ignoring meddlesome problems but by managing them. Alliance leaders aggregate competing ideas and issues of concern and capitalize on the plethora of ideas and issues to advance the common work. They do not rush to compromise. Compromise generally results in a "lowest common denominator" outcome—one that is acceptable to all but engaging to none. Profoundly satisfying outcomes are only reached through the free flow of competing ideas.

Agree on a common price. Tuitions vary among partners in inter-institutional distance education alliances. Fees also vary. By agreeing on a common "price" that respects different tuition/fee arrangements among the partner institutions, the alliance can manage tuition inequities among institutions, allow students to enroll in all courses at their admitting university, and potentially finance the core functions of the alliance through student enrollments in courses.

Faculty work and administrator work. As inter-institutional programs develop, there is a tendency for faculty and administrators to intrude on the appropriate responsibilities of one another. In inter-institutional programs, just as in institution-based programs, the work progresses most smoothly when the administrative team manages the policies, processes, and oversight and the faculty team manages the academic planning and instruction.