**Insights and Observations about Collaboration**

By Susan Palmer March 26, 2017

For colleges and universities that value interaction and the creation of knowledge, collaboration with other organizations seems an appropriate way to operate. It’s not always automatic, however, given the distinct needs and cultures of individual institutions. Fortunately, there is a body of knowledge based on the experience of well-established higher-education consortia. This essay draws on that wider practice of collaboration but also includes examples from my 21 years as executive director of the Five Colleges of Ohio, a consortium of independent liberal-arts colleges.



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More private colleges want to collaborate to share costs and administrative responsibilities. But such coordination isn’t easy.

**Why collaborate?**

Inside the word "collaboration" is the intention that those involved will work together to create something of greater value than could have been produced by individual efforts. For Denison University, Kenyon College, Ohio Wesleyan University, Oberlin College, and the College of Wooster, the impetus to collaborate began with wondering if they could use technology to share and improve access to library resources as a way to slow the need for construction of additional shelf space. To facilitate and formalize the group’s work, the "Ohio Five" entity was created as an organization committed to fostering cooperation and understanding, coordinating operating functions and services, developing academic programs that share resources, and enhancing quality while reducing costs.

**To begin, know where you’re headed.**

Collaboration often starts simply enough with a willingness to share ideas. To become a more formal organization requires defining core principles and agreeing on a governance structure and operational principles.

The consortial community should know the role and makeup of the board of directors and the responsibilities of standing committees. Robust governing documents contain straightforward criteria for membership and procedures to follow to discontinue membership. For the Ohio Five, established operational standards include keeping the number of consortial staff positions small, assuming that not all members need to participate in every activity, and dividing costs equally among those involved.

**Consider what’s new and necessary.**

Some tasks can be undertaken relatively quickly and easily by a consortium, such as organizing workshops for peers or hiring outside experts to review similar departments. It’s more difficult to tackle problems that require college staff members to make changes in their work processes, like introducing or upgrading technology systems. Another course is to identify what’s both new and necessary. For example, if the government issues regulations requiring college compliance (perhaps related to Title IX or environmental health and safety), addressing the new rules together can be more efficient and result in comprehensive solutions.

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**Put people first.**

The legal members of a consortium are often the colleges and universities. It is, however, the people themselves who are involved in and affected by consortial endeavors. Whether the project is an academic collaboration to improve the quality of the curriculum or an administrative effort to design more efficient workflows, it’s crucial that the participants learn to collaborate.

Thus, a long-term strategy is to provide time and space for people to get to know one another. One way this can happen is by inviting groups to meet in order to share information about projects and programs. The group insights and ideas are helpful when one college is considering a contract, grant proposal, staff position, or project, and especially when a college is looking for partners to share in a new venture.

For a collaborative project, even if the focus is on a technology solution or acquisition of an outside resource, having the right person in place may be the key to success. When the Five Colleges of Ohio agreed to jointly create an online procurement system, the first step was to hire a specialist to organize and guide the process. Having a highly qualified person in position was vital; it assured good decisions, a coordinated process, proper follow-through, and long-term use of the system.

**Recognize that risks need rewards.**

The consortium can be an appropriate place to experiment, allowing the willing members to spread the risk of a new venture among themselves. The experiments that work best are those that offer significant, identifiable benefits to those invested in the project or to those they serve.

The first project undertaken by the Ohio Five, which was to establish a joint library system, stands as an exceptional example of the power of a valuable reward. By licensing one instance of the library-management software and hiring one technology manager, the consortium realizes consistent annual savings. Moreover, through our choice of software, the colleges were able to join Ohio­LINK, the statewide library consortium. Membership allows everyone at the colleges to access print and digital scholarly resources held by the more than 100 OhioLINK members.

**Share the administrative responsibilities.**

As the first Ohio Five programs were established, member colleges volunteered to take responsibility for necessary aspects of running the organization. One college acts as the fiscal agent and provides human-resources functions. Others provide office space for consortial employees and host major software systems. In that way, the consortial employees can focus on programs and activities rather than back-office functions. An important bonus is that when the colleges share the work, they become invested in the success of the consortium.

**Always be prepared.**

Consortial work can be complex, given the number of people who need to participate. It’s best, therefore, to expect the unexpected. Sometimes surprises are welcome, as when someone proposes a unique symposium or innovative workshop. If, however, a key participant unexpectedly accepts a position at another institution, a grant is not funded, or a member decides independently to switch to a new vendor, the surprise can be difficult to accept. In such cases, one must honestly review the reasons for the decision, analyze how the consortium will be affected, and decide the best way to move forward.

Beyond being prepared for change, collaborators must learn to embrace the intangibles, especially the relationships that build community. It will be those relationships that make collaboration work, so it’s important to honor the contributions of the member institutions, the individuals who participate in joint endeavors, and the employees of the consortium who add value by helping others achieve success.

As I look ahead to retirement this summer, I’m more convinced than ever of the value of collaboration, even with its complications and sometimes slow pace. The work offers a rare and rewarding opportunity to learn about higher education, improve how diverse institutions operate, and be a part of an organization with a positive mission.

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This article is part of:

[Working Together Better](http://www.chronicle.com/specialreport/Working-Together-Better/101)

A version of this article appeared in the  [March 31, 2017 issue](http://www.chronicle.com/issue/2017/03-31).