Cross-Institutional Collaboration

Scenario
Becca studies broadcasting at Studio College and is beginning an internship at the EDGE Collective, a collaboration between two arts schools and two institutions focused on technology. The collective’s mission is to enable the exchange of skills between the institutions, including courses co-taught by faculty at different campuses. The collective operates virtually, with each institution devoting offices and staff to the project. The collective’s offices at Studio College are home to the assistant director, an event organizer, and two marketing staff. Becca will be assisting all of them in different ways, and her first two weeks are spent working with the event planner on the annual EDGE Collective Maker Faire. Fine arts and graphic design will be on display next to games and augmented reality experiences for mobile devices. Students from member campuses can meet students and faculty from other schools and learn about opportunities to work together on various projects. In one case, film students connect with computer science students who are working with computer animation, which the film students need for a project they are working on. The collective sponsors other workshops covering 3D printing, robotics, and other areas.

What is it?
Colleges and universities collaborate for many reasons. Whether the institutions involved seek important research and development solutions, the ability to broaden curricula despite limited resources, or the leverage to negotiate prices and terms from vendors, cross-institutional collaborations can provide an avenue to those goals. A consortium can, for example, accomplish complex and far-reaching tasks—from promoting the development of better technologies for teaching and learning to promoting international studies—more effectively than an institution acting alone. **Collaborations cross the boundaries of individual colleges or universities and promote a shared vision and common goals.** Some collaborations are informal, whereas others include the establishment of guiding principles for action and require a significant level of commitment from involved parties, often resulting in an entirely new entity.

How does it work?
A collaboration can evolve in a number of ways. At an institutional, departmental, or faculty level, a common interest around specific courses, administrative services, or other goals can drive the process of cooperating to pursue those goals. In many cases, the work becomes sufficiently formalized that institutions develop explicit structures, such as a steering committee and bylaws. Members may agree to joint funding, and they may hire a shared staff to support those projects. Collaborators might share technology, such as high-speed networks and rapid data exchange in support of research, teaching, and learning. In some cases, technology may be developed among the members, becoming a product of the collaboration rather than an enabling medium.

Who’s doing it?
Over many years, higher education has cultivated a **large number of cross-institutional collaborations**, spanning a wide range of goals and sizes. The Committee on Institutional Cooperation has been sharing resources and building communities of practice among faculty and administrators since 1958. It fosters numerous joint projects, many powered by a shared fiber-optic network. Students in all member institutions share access to resources such as libraries, study abroad

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programs, and online language courses across the consortium. The Council of Independent Colleges includes more than 600 private liberal arts colleges and universities that work together to share skills, tools, knowledge, and solutions that contribute to academic excellence and institutional recognition. Among newer multi-institutional collaborations are Unizin and the Competency-Based Education Network (C-BEN), both established in 2014. Unizin is a university-owned consortium working to provide a teaching and learning platform and software solutions that help universities take greater control over their content, more effectively manage data, and incorporate analytics to identify and respond to educational trends. C-BEN participants, which cover a broad range of institutional types, work together on programs to support competency-based degree programs.

4 Why is it significant?

Being part of a cross-institutional collaboration can help a college or university accomplish things that an individual institution might not. Smaller institutions, for example, might collectively offer a technology course that requires rare or expensive equipment or a language course that isn’t cost-effective for any single school to provide. A collaborative group of research universities could gather experts who can draw joint grants, and research collaborations often involve establishing high-performance computing clusters that provide considerable capacity to the members. Group purchasing power gives a consortium the ability to purchase technology at a negotiated lower price and share costly or rare technological resources. Collaborators may find that they can effectively influence vendors in the design both of technology available in the educational market and of the larger learning ecosystem. Finally, collaboration among institutions can reduce duplication of effort among those working jointly on a problem and provide multiple voices for troubleshooting and problem solving during the implementation stages of a project.

5 What are the downsides?

When joining a consortium, a college or university may find it necessary to invest time, money, and staff resources for benefits that are not immediate. Once an institution becomes part of a collaborative project, it will forfeit at least some measure of control. Moreover, leadership changes can take projects in different directions from those initially intended and agreed upon. A multi-institutional approach to technology development can be slower than a solution purchased off the shelf, and it potentially requires some reconciliation of cultural and policy differences across institutions. Where member colleges and universities are peers, there may be a sense of collaborating with the competition, particularly if technology development treads into areas that some members might feel differentiate their university from others. Alternatively, where collaborating institutions are not peers, differences in size, mission, and resources can add complexity to the relationship.

6 Where is it going?

Because colleges and universities are increasingly expected to leverage technology to do more with less, collaborative efforts can often enable the more efficient use of resources, both by sharing the resources schools have and by creating purchasing cooperatives. Where collaborations develop new technologies, the focus is likely to be on services that are general in character, such as administrative software or management systems, with universities choosing not to collaborate in areas that serve as differentiators. With increasing pressure to control resources and increase outcomes, colleges and universities are likely to pursue greater numbers of collaborations with a wider array of goals. As particular technologies become commodity services, higher education will find greater impetus to offer such services through partnerships. At the same time, collaborations focused on certain technologies will help colleges and universities develop those tools in ways that might not be well served by the commercial marketplace. The landscape of academic sharing is likely to grow more complicated, forming an overlapping mosaic as existing consortia join with multi-campus institutions to create ever more complex academic collaborations.

7 What are the implications for teaching and learning?

Where suitable technology-based solutions are not provided by vendors to meet a learning need, a consortium may choose to develop them, often with a sharper focus on what will work best for students and education. By their development efforts and their influence on vendors, these large collaborative organizations will continue to affect the technologies and tools for teaching and learning. A collaborative organization can take good ideas forward and emerge with results that might not otherwise manifest. Such benefits can target educational goals directly, even including areas such as curriculum development, or indirectly through cost-saving programs that allow money to be redirected for educational purposes.