# Partnerships Among Institutions from Different Sectors of Higher Education: Expanding Views of Collaboration for Outreach and Community Service

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## Abstract

Institutional diversity is a great strength of the American higher education system. At times, however, this diversity has acted as a barrier to institutional partnerships for outreach and community service. This paper discusses the findings of a study that examined the perceptions of leaders from different sectors of the higher education community regarding factors affecting interinstitutional agreements and consortia. The findings indicate that different types of institutions can identify common and divergent issues to more effectively form partnerships for community service. Recommendations are presented, particularly regarding non-traditional collaboration for outreach and community service functions.

Colleges and universities face many challenges and hardships today, including economic uncertainty, limited taxpayer support, a seemingly unbreakable cycle of tuition increases, legislative demands for accountability, and a significant loss of public esteem. According to Neal *(1988, v)*, "challenges to colleges and universities bring with them new opportunities for cooperation," and many higher education leaders are beginning to see collaboration and institutional partnerships as optimal opportunities for their institutions to enhance and expand access to higher education, obtain grant funds for research, and expand vital community service functions in the years ahead.

Given the tradition of institutional autonomy and competition among colleges and universities, cooperation among institutions in the same sector of the higher education community (e.g., public, private, four-year, and two-year institutions) is difficult; attempting consortial relationships among institutions from different sectors is especially challenging *(Harden 1991; Ostar 1981)*. After all, institutions from different sectors of higher education may vary substantially in mission, organizational structure, and degree of commitment to the basic functions of postsecondary education,

including outreach and service. When institutions from different sectors of higher education do cooperate, they "present a powerful presence in the community. . . . When they do not cooperate, the result is gaps in information and communication" *(Ostar 1981, 109)*.

An understanding of how leaders of different types of institutions may act through consortial processes and how they perceive factors affecting interinstitutional agreements and consortia could help to fill in these communication gaps and improve the chances for sustained success in intersector partnerships. The identification and understanding of differences in leaders' perceptions of various aspects of collaboration and partnerships—such as differing perceptions of leaders of public institutions compared to leaders of private institutions or leaders of two-year institutions as compared to leaders of four-year institutions—could be beneficial to practitioners attempting to build or sustain these consortial relationships.

## Institutional Collaboration

Finding solutions to the challenges facing higher education today requires leaders who are truly innovative thinkers with the ability to find creative answers to the complex challenges facing colleges and universities. Despite a tradition of autonomy and competition among institutions of higher education, many higher education leaders today acknowledge that collaborative relationships have greatly benefited their institutions. The mission of most consortia is, after all, to "enable the members to achieve together, through cooperation, what cannot be achieved alone" *(Baus and Ramsbottom 1999, 4)*.

Academic consortia exist to serve their member institutions, and they often enhance the capability of each member institution to fulfill its institutional mission. These associations have directly led to cost savings, expanded programs and services, and enhanced academic outcomes for students *(Dotolo and Strandness 1999; Neal 1988)*. As demands for community services have increased, institutional collaboration in higher education is often seen as an avenue for lowering costs while sustaining program availability, quality, and integrity. Although partnerships are not a universal remedy for all challenges facing higher education, current political, economic, and institutional factors make it likely that interinstitutional collaboration will play an increasing role in the future of higher education *(Pennington and Williams 2001)*.

This may be particularly true for colleges and universities involved in community service. As a result of changing societal forces, many institutions from all sectors of higher education are looking for more opportunities to form relationships to enhance the delivery of community service functions and to deliver cost-effective and innovative public service programs. No individual institution can act as a single source or solution for community challenges such as worker training, community leadership development, and economic development *(Williams 2002)*.

Against this background, it seems that cooperation between institutions from different sectors of higher education (e.g., public and private institutions or two-year and four-year institutions) would be a natural occurrence, but long-term agreements between sectors are difficult to initiate and limited in scope. If educational leaders are to expand the scope of these innovative arrangements, however, it may be helpful for them to understand how leaders of different types of institutions perceive the factors that affect the establishment, development, and sustainability of these relationships. For example, Smithand colleagues *(1999)* indicate there has been a lack of knowledge on how leaders' perceptions of collaboration can affect the creation and sustainability of agreements and consortia in the future. Data comparing the perspectives of leaders, using institutional type as a variable, could be valuable to institutional leaders and practitioners interested in forming, enhancing, and sustaining interinstitutional relationships. Conversely, a lack of appreciation of these perspectives could result in consortia or agreements never developing, being ineffective, or terminating prematurely because of the lack of information regarding these factors.

## Research on Interinstitutional Collaboration

With this in mind, a study was conducted that examined the perceptions of leaders of various types of institutions within the higher education community regarding factors affecting four types of interinstitutional agreements and consortia *(Williams 2001)*. These consortial relationships focused on (a) academic programs, (b) sharing facilities and services, (c) professional development projects, and (d) community service and outreach. The objectives of this study were to provide data on higher education leaders' perceptions of factors affecting consortial relationships and to determine whether there are significant differences in the perceptions of

leaders of two-year and four-year institutions or leaders of public and private institutions regarding these factors.

To identify factors affecting interinstitutional agreements and consortia, a review of the literature was conducted; the resulting list of factors was reviewed, modified, and rated by a panel of ten professionals with experience in partnerships or consortia in higher education. Then, in order to collect data from a wide range of institutional leaders, a mail survey was created. Initially, a draft survey instrument was generated, and content validity was determined by asking the panel of professionals and a group of pilot study participants to evaluate the appropriateness of the survey items for measuring factors that affect interinstitutional agreements and consortia. The 33 factors were placed in four categories that were established following a review of the literature: (1) policy and procedural factors (n = 9), which included items on mission, organizational structure, and communication; (2) leadership factors (n = 5), which focused on vision, commitment, and decision making; (3) internal institutional factors (n = 13), which covered topics such as financial and human resources, including administrators, faculty, and staff; and (4) external factors (n = 6), which included outreach, community service, meeting regional needs, and response to demands for accountability and services. The final instrument asked leaders to give their perceptions of these factors through the use of a five-point Likert scale with options ranging from "very important factor" to "not an important factor."

*"The results of the study indicate that there are more similarities than differences in the perceptions of leaders regarding the factors that affect interinstitutional agreements and consortia in higher education."*

The survey instrument was mailed to the chief executive officers of all 194 accredited institutions of higher education in North Carolina and Florida. Colleges and universities in these states represent all types and classifications of institutions in the higher education community. Each is home to a mix of public and private colleges and universities, and each state has a number of urban and rural institutions, schools with large and small enrollments, and diverse racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic populations.

**Table 1. Summary of Respondents by Type of Institution**

| Type of Institution | Mailed | Returned | Return Rate |
|---|---|---|---|
| Public Universities | 26 | 17 | 65.0% |
| Private Four-year | 79 | 33 | 42.0% |
| Community Colleges | 86 | 64 | 74.0% |
| Private Two-year | 3 | 1 | 33.0% |
| Total | 194 | 115 | 59.3% |

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In North Carolina, there were 117 institutions of higher education, including 58 community colleges, 16 public universities, 41 private four-year colleges and universities, and 2 private two-year colleges. There were 77 institutions of higher education in Florida, including 28 community colleges, 10 public universities, 38 private four-year colleges and universities, and one private two-year college.

As shown in Table 1, 115 survey instruments were returned, representing a total return rate of 59.3 percent; 65 (56.5 percent) responses were from public and private two-year colleges and 50 (43.5 percent) from four-year institutions; 34 survey instruments (29.6 percent) were returned by private institutions and 81 (70.4 percent) by public institutions. Seventy-three percent of the respondents held the title president, chancellor, or chief executive officer. A total of 108 responding institutions (94 percent) were involved in interinstitutional agreements or consortia.

The chi-square test of independence and the analysis of variance were used to determine whether there was reliable evidence of differences in leaders' perceptions of factors affecting agreements and consortia according to the leaders' institutional type.

The results of the study indicate that there are more similarities than differences in the perceptions of leaders regarding the factors that affect interinstitutional agreements and consortia in higher education. In three of the four major areas of consortial activity—academic programs, sharing resources and facilities,

**Table 2.  Contingency Analysis Results of Leaders' Perceptions of the Factor "Identification of Regional Economic or Workforce Development Needs that Could Be Addressed by an Agreement or Consortium," by Institutional Type (Two-year or Four-year Institution)**

| | Addressing Regional Needs | |
|---|---|---|
| Institutional Type | Very Important Important | Somewhat Important Not Important |
| Two-year Institutions | 56 86% | 9 14% |
| Four-year Institutions | 24 48% | 26 52% |
| Chi square = 19.431 | p = .000 | |
| Cramer's V = .411 | | |
| Lambda = .224 | | |

Alpha = .0015 (adjusted)

**Note:** The .05 level of significance was determined to be appropriate for this study. Since factors rather than constructs were used for analysis, the experiment wise error rate was controlled by applying the Bonferroni critical value procedure, which adjusts the level of significance for the number of tests being performed. In this case the adjusted alpha level became .0015.

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and professional development—no factors yielded statistically significant differences in the perceptions of leaders of different types of institutions.

## Differences in Perceptions of Community Service and Outreach

Significant differences were found, however, in leaders' perceptions of external factors related to community service and outreach. These differences provide significant insight into areas that require special attention when planning, developing, or sustaining institutional relationships that cross sectors of higher education. Differences in leaders' perceptions were found concerning external factors related to how institutions of higher education

view community service and outreach in areas such as meeting regional needs or economic development.

For example, as indicated in Table 2, the perceptions of two-year college leaders different significantly from the perceptions of leaders of four-year institutions regarding only one factor that affects interinstitutional agreements and consortia in higher education: "addressing regional needs." For this factor, 86 percent of the leaders of two-year colleges gave a rating of very important or important as opposed to just 48 percent of the leaders of four-year institutions. This factor, which concerns identification of economic or workforce development needs that could be addressed by an agreement or consortium, represented the largest difference in perception between leaders of two-year institutions and four-year institutions among the 33 factors in the survey instrument.

**Table 3. Contingency Analysis Results of Leaders' Perceptions of the Factor "Consortium-based Opportunities Exist to Increase Access to Postsecondary Education for Minority Students and Other Traditionally Underserved Groups," by Institutional Type (Two-year or Four-year Institution)**

| | Access for Underserved Groups | |
|---|---|---|
| Institutional Type | Very Important Important | Somewhat Important Not Important |
| Two-year Institutions | 68 84% | 13 16% |
| Four-year Institutions | 17 50% | 17 50% |
| Chi square = 14.316 | p = .000 | |
| Cramer's V = .353 | | |
| Lambda = .063 | | |

Alpha = .0015 (adjusted)

**Note:** The .05 level of significance was determined to be appropriate for this study. Since factors rather than constructs were used for analysis, the experiment wise error rate was controlled by applying the Bonferroni critical value procedure, which adjusts the level of significance for the number of tests being performed. In this case the adjusted alpha level became .0015.

**Table 4.  Contingency Analysis Results of Leaders' Perceptions of the Factor "The Consortium Offers the Ability to Improve each Member Institution's Response to External (i.e., Legislative, Community, or Corporate) Demands for Services or Account-ability," by Institutional Type (Two-year or Four-year Institution)**

| Institutional Type | Response to External Demands | |
| --- | --- | --- |
| | Very Important Important | Somewhat Important Not Important |
| Two-year Institutions | 70 87% | 11 13% |
| Four-year Institutions | 20 59% | 14 41% |
| Chi square = 10.720 | p = .001 | |
| Cramer's V = .305 | | |
| Lambda = .051 | | |

Alpha = .0015 (adjusted)

**Note:** The .05 level of significance was determined to be appropriate for this study. Since factors rather than constructs were used for analysis, the experiment wise error rate was controlled by applying the Bonferroni critical value procedure, which adjusts the level of significance for the number of tests being performed. In this case the adjusted alpha level became .0015.

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Tables 3, 4, and 5 denote that there were also significant differences for three outreach and community service factors concerning the perceptions of leaders of public institutions as compared to the perceptions of leaders of private institutions: access for underserved groups, response to external demands, and addressing regional needs. Among leaders of public institutions, 84 percent perceived the factor "access for underserved groups" as very important, or important as opposed to 50 percent of the leaders of private institutions. This factor concerned consortium-based opportunities to increase access to postsecondary education for minority students and other traditionally underserved groups.

A strong majority of the leaders of public institutions (87 percent) perceived the factor "response to external demands" to be

**Table 5. Contingency Analysis Results of Leaders' Perceptions of the Factor "Identification of Regional Economic or Workforce Development Needs that could be Addressed by an Agreement or Consortium," by Institutional Type (Two-year or Four-year Institution)**

| | Addressing Regional Needs | |
|---|---|---|
| Institutional Type | Very Important Important | Somewhat Important Not Important |
| Two-year Institutions | 67 83% | 14 17% |
| Four-year Institutions | 13 38% | 21 62% |
| Chi square = 22.379 | p = .000 | |
| Cramer's V = .441 | | |
| Lambda = .217 | | |

Alpha = .0015 (adjusted)

**Note:** The .05 level of significance was determined to be appropriate for this study. Since factors rather than constructs were used for analysis, the experiment wise error rate was controlled by applying the Bonferroni critical value procedure, which adjusts the level of significance for the number of tests being performed. In this case the adjusted alpha level became .0015.

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very important or important, while a significantly smaller majority (59 percent) of leaders of private institutions perceived this factor to be very important or important. This factor concerns the consortium's ability to improve each member institution's response to external (i.e., legislative, community, or corporate) demands for services.

There were also significant differences in public and private institutional leaders' perceptions of the factor "addressing regional needs." Eighty-three percent of the leaders of public institutions perceived this factor to be very important or important as compared to only 38 percent of the leaders of private institutions. This factor represents the largest disparity between the perceptions of leaders of public institutions and leaders of private institutions.

## Discussion and Implications

Pursuant to the findings of this study, there is a significant amount of agreement among leaders of institutions from all sectors of the higher education community regarding factors affecting consortial relationships focused on academic programs, sharing facilities and services, and professional development. Therefore, partnerships involving institutions from different sectors of higher education should be not only be achievable but perhaps even more beneficial to the participating institutions, their students, and their external constituencies than had previously been considered.

The more noteworthy findings of this study, however, relate to the factors that produced note-worthy differences in the perceptions of leaders from different sectors of higher education. These factors provide important data to practitioners and leaders interested in establishing or sustaining partnerships focused on outreach and community service, and may encourage leaders and practitioners to consider non-traditional institutional relationships.

> *"Extending community college services to the region in which they are located is basic to their mission."*

- With regard to two-year and four-year institutional leaders, the differences found for the factor "addressing regional needs" are directly related to differences in the institutional missions of community colleges and four-year institutions. Leaders of two-year institutions perceive addressing regional needs to be more important than do leaders of four-year institutions. Vaughan *(1997)* pointed out that an important part of the basic mission of community colleges is community service and addressing community or regional needs. Conversely, according to Breneman *(1994)*, many four-year private institutions, particularly liberal arts colleges, may not have as strong a commitment to community service in their missions and may not be as committed to utilizing their resources to address regional needs.

- With regard to "access for adults and traditionally underserved groups," the difference in the perceptions of leaders of public and private institutions reflects divergence in institutional objectives. A goal of public institutions, particularly land-grant institutions and community colleges, is to expand

access to higher education, making it more available to non-dominant ethnic and racial groups and other traditionally underserved groups. Additionally, most community colleges provide individual services that many private institutions are either not equipped or not willing to offer for first-generation college students and non-traditional students.

- With regard to the factor "responses to external demands for services or accountability," public institutions such as land-grant universities and community colleges are generally required to be concerned with legislative or public demands for accountability or new services, while legislative bodies generally have little authority to demand accountability or services from private colleges. Therefore, it is logical to expect that a higher percentage of leaders of public institutions would be concerned with outreach and community service and would perceive the factor "responses to external demands" to be important.

- The factor "addressing regional needs" represents the largest disparity between categories of leaders for the five factors in which statistically significant differences were found. Community colleges, as public institutions, account for a large portion of this disparity. Extending community college services to the region in which they are located is basic to their mission, and "the scope of offerings is limited only by staff energies and imagination and by the funds available" *(Cohen and Brawer 1996, 291)*. In contrast, Ostar *(1981)* indicated that because of different missions, leaders of private institutions are sometimes not as interested in utilizing institutional resources for education outreach or community service.

## Recommendations

A growing number of leaders in higher education seem to agree that institutions can compete and cooperate at the same time, and that institutional diversity is a great strength of the American higher education system. These leaders acknowledge the potential of institutional agreements and consortia not only to confront the challenges facing colleges and universities today, but also to solve community problems. It is important to remember that legislators, taxpayers, and community leaders may see all types of institutions of higher education as existing to serve their needs. Therefore, they may see non-traditional partnerships for

community service, such as a community college and a research university, as not only logical but expected.

> *"Each type of institution can bring its unique strengths to focus on the needed community service."*

Large public research universities, private liberal arts colleges, and community colleges have very different but equally important missions. They have diverse but valuable roles in teaching and learning. It is reasonable to expect that these institutions would have diverse—but equally beneficial—roles in outreach and community service.

Stein and Short *(2001)* pointed out that a concern in starting a collaborative arrangement is whether the partners will "acknowledge, celebrate, and emphasize these differences, or whether they will minimize (or even deny) these differences" *(432)*. Differing views should be accepted and acclaimed in order to improve higher education's service to community and regional needs. With this emphasis on strength through diversity in mind, the following recommendations concerning partnerships for outreach and community service are offered:

1. Institutions with different missions should recognize the strength of diversity when collaborating to find the most effective and comprehensive manner of addressing community and regional needs. In doing this, all types of institutions of higher education can become closer to the model of what the Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land-Grant Universities referred to as the engaged university: "reaching beyond their campuses and joining in partnership with those elements of society that benefit from a shared endeavor" *(Byrne 2000, 15)*. Each type of institution can bring its unique strengths to focus on the needed community service. For example, public and private four-year institutions may serve as sources of knowledge and information, provide data on trends and issues related to community issues, supply expertise, and conduct applied research related to community concerns; in addition to an emphasis on community service, community colleges can contribute to community development

through excellent teaching and customized programs *(Williams 2002)*.

2.  Special considerations may be needed when pursuing strategic outreach partnerships between institutions that have traditionally not been considered potential allies, such as collaborations involving private four-year colleges and community colleges or private liberal arts colleges and public research universities. For example, according to Usnick, Shove, and Gissy *(1997)*, conventional wisdom has long held that the presence of a major research university is necessary for economic or community development, but a research university alone is not sufficient to guarantee successful development. In fact, unique benefits can result from institutions that "experiment with nontraditional institutional partnerships in providing community services" *(Williams 2002, 35)*. If these nontraditional relationships are to be successful, leaders and practitioners should fully understand the mission of each participating institution and how institutional mission may affect successful collaboration for outreach and community service.

> *"[L]eaders and practitioners should fully understand the mission of each participating institution and how institutional mission may affect successful collaboration for outreach and community service."*

3.  Regional meetings should be developed to assist institutional leaders and practitioners in the field to develop strategies to establish and sustain innovative intersector partnerships for outreach and community service. These meetings could serve to reduce the competition and the hierarchical predispositions often found between two-year and four-year institutions.

4.  Building upon a recommendation first made by Smithand colleagues *(1999)*, institutions interested in pursuing nontraditional agreements in outreach and community service might assign a senior-level administrator to focus on these relationships and to help recognize how collaboration can assist in addressing the ever-changing problems facing both higher education and society.

## Conclusion

Institutions of higher education can be a rich and significant resource for community service, and universities want to demonstrate responsiveness to their communities and regions by becoming active partners in community development activities *(Usnick, Shove, and Gissy 1997)*.

By forming strategic partnerships targeted to outreach and community service, intersector alliances can take higher education's service functions to new levels. Indeed, higher education must become involved with society in a way that emphasizes partnerships and interconnections: "Engagement with others will not be an option for universities of tomorrow, be they public or private—it will be a defining characteristic" *(Byrne 2000, 13)*.

Colleges and universities can contribute to society in a number of ways—discovering new knowledge, filling knowledge gaps, providing economic and social trend analyses, educating and training individuals, and acting as a catalyst for community action as well as learning from non-university sources—and through a number of community outreach activities that can be broadly categorized as: economic and social research, applied research and technology transfer, workforce assessments, and organization of interdisciplinary knowledge for problem solving and capacity building *(Walshok 1997)*.

Knowledge about perceptions of intersector institutional relationships for outreach and community service can be valuable to practitioners and leaders in higher education who are interested in engagement. This knowledge presents the opportunity to learn the perspectives of other leaders regarding institutional partnerships and consortia. These shared perspectives can assist leaders of all types of institutions in understanding the nature of cooperative partnerships and the outreach and community service opportunities they present to individual institutions. This information will be especially important in an era in which political expectations, fiscal constraints, and demands for accountability require cost-effective means of delivering quality education and community service without placing undue financial burdens on tuition-paying students or the tax-paying public.

Colleges and universities are places where diverse groups naturally interact, and the potential for innovative approaches to outreach and engagement is greatest when a variety of institutions of higher education collaborate. Diverse missions allow dissimilar

institutions to bring unique strengths to cooperative efforts to address community demands and regional needs. There is no reason why diverse institutions of higher education should not continue to engage in productive competition, but there are also many reasons why they should, at appropriate times, form interinstitutional partnerships and consortia. Reasoned inquiry, comprehension of complex issues, and the application of knowledge and research are among the activities which colleges and universities do best to serve communities and address regional needs. Each of these endeavors can be enhanced through interinstitutional collaboration involving institutions from different sectors of higher education.

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