

An Itinerary for Two-Year/Four-Year Institutional Collaboration: Lessons from a New Partnership

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Abstract

The founding of a community college in a metropolitan area served by a comprehensive public university offered both institutions a unique opportunity for collaboration. Without a legacy of competition for students and funding to impede their work, the two institutions created a comprehensive partnership that addresses issues of articulation, transfer, resources, and post-secondary participation in the region. Communicating the value of collaboration to institutional constituencies and the public was vital to this collaborative experience.

While collaboration between community colleges and four-year colleges and universities is hardly a new phenomenon in post-secondary education, the path of these educational partnerships is not always smooth. The experience of creating one such partnership, involving a comprehensive community college and a public university located in a tri-state metropolitan area, has helped clarify for the participants certain basic issues of two-year/four-year collaboration that should be recognized and addressed by other institutions that are planning such partnerships or are seeking to revitalize existing partnerships. A distinctive feature of the partnership that is the subject of this paper is that the collaboration was initiated as the two-year institution was being created. Participants in this particular project found that initiating an educational partnership during the founding of one of the partner institutions presented opportunities to avoid or minimize problems that sometimes limit the effectiveness of two-year/four-year agreements between more mature institutions.

The four-year university involved in the partnership had for some thirty years of its existence provided a limited inventory of associate degrees in addition to baccalaureate and master's degree programs. Growth in undergraduate enrollment and expansion of the number of master's programs over the years made it difficult to maintain the institution's role as provider of community college programs however. In addition, economic expansion in the area created demand for more associate degrees related to workforce development. This need the university was unable to meet due to its commitment to four-year and master's programs. Accordingly, when the region began a campaign in the state legislature for funding to create a community college, the university endorsed the community college initiative in the legislature and the media, calling it an important step forward for post-secondary education and for the economy of the region. More will be said about this support during the course of this paper.

Despite the university's support for the new two-year college, both institutions realized that collaboration between associate and baccalaureate institutions is often superficial and agreements linking them can easily become documents that have little effect on the cultures of the institutions involved and, more to the point, fail to address the needs of the very constituency there were designed to assist, the students of two-year colleges. The primary goals of two-year and four-year institutional partnerships are to expand the educational horizon of community college students and to make the transition from associate to baccalaureate degree programs as free of obstacles as possible. A partnership that does not achieve these objectives at some level is not worth continuing. But why is it that some associate/baccalaureate institutional partnerships create transfer environments in which student achievement flourishes while other efforts at institutional collaboration fail to achieve even the modest goal of increasing the number of students transferring from a community college to a four-year institution after completion of an associate degree? Careful study of the creation of a new two-year/four-year partnership, one in which one of the partners is a newly founded institution, may suggest some answers to this question.

Confronting Barriers to Institutional Collaboration

- The waters of associate/baccalaureate partnerships are sometimes troubled by one or more of the following factors:
- The two institutions have a history of competing aggressively for a limited pool of students in their common service area;
- There is an elitist attitude toward the community college by the four-year institution; faculty and/or administrators at the four-year institution may assume that education at the baccalaureate level is inherently "superior" in quality to that provided at the associate degree level;
- There is considerable duplication of mission and program inventories between the two institutions;
- The four-year institution suspects that its enrollment has or will be diminished by the two-year institution because of lower tuition cost, different admissions standards, or other factors;
- The two-year institution suspects that admissions barriers at the four-year institution are designed to force large numbers of under-prepared students to enroll at the community college, thus diverting scarce resources away from the associate degree programs it offers.

In the case of the partnership described in this paper, several of these problematic factors were simply absent due to the fact that the community college was in its infancy. Therefore there was no history of competition, duplication, or suspicion to overcome as dialogue between the two institutions began. The new comprehensive community college (constructed over the existing framework of a technical college) began to design its programs with the four-year institution's curriculum in mind and the four-year institution was consulted about associate degrees that could be "feeders"

for baccalaureate programs. While some personnel at the new community college had roles at the former technical college, others were new to the institution and so came to the table with no burdens of the past regarding their neighbors at the baccalaureate institution. All this contributed to an atmosphere of trust and shared purpose in which the task of designing a post-secondary educational partnership could proceed with few impediments.

There was also an external stimulus for this atmosphere of trust and shared purpose. The founding of the new community college followed on the heels of the creation of an agenda for post-secondary education by the state-wide coordinating council. The essence of the agenda was to make public colleges and universities part of a plan for enhancing the educational level of the state's population and thereby improving the state's competitiveness in attracting and retaining new business and industry. To this end, the coordinating council set two inter-related state-wide goals for public post-secondary education: To increase both the number of students matriculating into post-secondary education and the percentage of those students who graduate with degrees.

Within this framework, promoting transition from associate to baccalaureate degree institutions plays a key role. Encouraging community college students to continue post-secondary education beyond the associate degree not only promotes the acquisition of additional skills and knowledge, it can also help improve retention and degree completion at the associate level. From the perspective of public policy, the two-year/four-year transfer issue in post-secondary education also has significant economic and social implications:

The 2/4 community college—baccalaureate transfer function is one of the most important state policy issues in higher education because its success (or failure) is central to many dimensions of state higher education performance, including access, equity, affordability, cost effectiveness, degree productivity, and quality. States that have strong 2/4 transfer performance will have lower state appropriations per degree. They will also do a better job of translating access into success and of reducing the disparities that prevent low-income and minority students from obtaining the baccalaureate degree. If the 2/4 transfer function is weak, however, students who initially enroll in a community college will be less likely to earn a baccalaureate degree, and those who do earn their degree will take longer and need more credits to do so (Wellman, p. 3).

And there is good reason to be concerned about transfer rates from associate to baccalaureate institutions. One study of community college student transfer rates to four-year institutions (using data from the 1990s) found that while some 71% of community college students expressed a desire to continue study at the baccalaureate level, only 39% actually enrolled in a four-year college or university within five years of matriculation at an associate degree institution (Bradburn, Hurst, and Peng, pp. 32-33). In light of these statistics, efforts at collaboration between associate and

baccalaureate degree institutions have earned a justifiably high priority on the agenda of contemporary higher education.

As a result of the articulation of goals for post-secondary education by their coordinating council, the baccalaureate and associate degree institutions described in this study assigned a similarly high priority to their own collaborative efforts. Active support for the local two-year/four-year partnership by the presidents of the two institutions proved critical to the progress of the initiative. Support by the two presidents was expressed in two ways. Initially, each president consistently affirmed that state-wide post-secondary goals were important for the local region. In addition, both presidents confirmed publicly that the population of the area could support healthy enrollments at both institutions. Third, the university president (with concurrence of his community college executive counterparts) negotiated an agreement with the coordinating council that essentially indemnified the four-year institution against loss of appropriations due to enrollment decline once the two-year institution was fully operational. Also important to the university's positive view of its new post-secondary partner was the internal message that creation of a community college would allow for reallocation of the four-year institution's resources to enhance support for its upper division baccalaureate and master's degree classes. Last but far from least was the crafting of a coordinated public message to community leaders and the general public that the presence of both an associate and a baccalaureate institution in the area would enrich the educational environment and respond more comprehensively to the economic and social challenges faced by the region. In other words, from the very beginning, institutional leadership and public relations personnel were "on the same page" in presenting the development of the new community college as a positive and progressive initiative for the region.

Shaping the Collaborative Process

The process of collaboration began with formation of a joint "transition team" that brought officials of the four-year institution face-to-face with interim leadership at the new comprehensive community college. As its first order of business, the team developed both a statement of purpose and a set of long-term goals to guide its work. The statement of purpose emphasized that the two institutions desired to create together a post-secondary educational environment that would:

- Expand access to post-secondary education in the region without costly duplication of associate degree programs;
- Limit costs and institutional stress associated with initial development of the new comprehensive community college;
- Ensure smooth transition from associate degree to bachelor's degree level for community college students;
- Coordinate distribution of post-secondary enrollments between the two institutions.

The transition team's statement of long-term goals included:

- Promote the state coordinating council's agenda of improving the participation rate in post-secondary education and improving retention and graduation rates of students;
- Remove or diminish financial, geographic, social, and familial barriers to post-secondary education for citizens of the region;
- Promote economic, cultural, and social progress in the three geographical tiers of the region: urban, suburban, and rural;
- Share facilities and educational programming wherever feasible and appropriate.

Next the team worked on a set of short-term goals designed to meet the needs of students at the existing technical college who were interested in preparing themselves for the full associate degrees to be offered by the new community college. The key issue here was access to courses that would meet requirements for the new associate degrees. General education courses in the physical and life sciences, for example, were rarely offered by the technical school but were regularly available at the four-year university. So an agreement was created whereby technical college students could enroll for courses at the university. The agreement gave technical college students access to designated courses on the university's class schedule at technical college tuition rates. The tuition differential was covered by means of a subsidy paid to the university by the new community college for each student enrolled in the designated courses. Despite the cost of the subsidy and because the initial number of students involved was small, this means of providing basic courses was less expensive for the community college than attempting to mount a full-scale curriculum during the transition period from technical college to associate-degree granting institution. Access to selected general education courses through the baccalaureate institution's curriculum allowed the new two-year institution to begin its associate programs without the undue delay that absence of key foundational courses would have caused.

Then the team turned its attention to the design of a comprehensive partnership agreement whose components would not only support the technical college's transition into a comprehensive community college but also create a structure for sustaining effective collaboration between the two institutions. The major components of the agreement included:

- A dual admissions program;
- Definition of the four-year institution as a provider of instruction for the community college during its initial stages of its development;
- Clarification of roles for each institution at common off-campus instructional sites;
- Plans for interaction between the faculties and staffs of the two institutions;
- A framework for both course-specific and program-specific articulation agreements;

- A commitment to continued communication and cooperation between officials of the two institutions beyond the initial stages of the community college's development;
- A commitment to measuring the success of the partnership by monitoring data on completion and transfer rates of dual admission students, numbers of students who participate in articulation agreements, and results of surveys of student satisfaction with programs and services offered jointly by the two institutions.

The Dual Admission Centerpiece

The centerpiece of this comprehensive partnership plan was the dual admission program, which was designed to encourage students at the community college to complete their associate degree and then continue on in a baccalaureate program at the four-year institution. One assumption that gave momentum to the creation of this program was the perception that the region contained a significant population of high school graduates who were to some degree intimidated by the idea of attending a four-year university and therefore chose not to participate in post-secondary education. This impression arose from a series of community meetings undertaken by the university as part of its strategic planning process. In these meetings, community members (especially in outlying rural counties) spoke of their ambivalence about the value of post-secondary education and their concern about the preparedness of their high school graduates for study beyond the secondary level. They also related stories about the disorientation that some of their students had felt while visiting the campus of the university.

An initial response to these community concerns came in the form of the establishment of a satellite campus of the university in a rural county several years before the vision of a new community college became a reality. The success of this satellite campus in assisting students in making the transition from a small, non-intimidating educational setting to a larger university campus reinforced the idea that strategies for making transitions into post-secondary education and through the levels of post-secondary education were needed if the college-going rate in the region served by the university and the new community college was to be improved.

The dual admission program involves strategies for bonding community college students with the baccalaureate institution even as they begin their post-secondary education at the associate level. Students accepted for dual admission will have access to selected facilities and activities at the four-year university. Among these are the library, tutoring services, and the health and recreation center. In addition, in their final semester at the community college, dual admission students will be eligible for priority status in registering for their first semester at the university. This benefit of the program will provide these students with the opportunity to enroll for high-demand classes that may be needed to fulfill any remaining general education requirements or course prerequisites needed to enter the curricula of their academic majors.

Another strategy for bridging the gap between associate and baccalaureate education is a jointly taught (and required) orientation to college class that consists of two components. The first is a one-hour class designed to introduce entering students to the community college and the initial expectations of post-secondary education. This first component is taught by community college instructors. The second component will be offered to dual admission students in their final semester at the community college. It is a two-hour class that introduces students to the environment of the four-year university and to the academic expectations at the baccalaureate degree level. This class will be taught by university faculty or team-taught by university and community college instructors. When completed, these two classes will transfer to the university as the equivalent of the three credit hour introduction to college class offered to first-year students entering the baccalaureate institution. Dual admission students thus participate in an introduction to college experience that is specifically tailored to the experience and needs of students intending to transfer from an associate degree institution to a baccalaureate program.

A third example of the types of collaboration that form part of the comprehensive partnership agreement is the support that the university will offer to the community college as it becomes an integral part of the higher education community in the region. The university will, when full regional accreditation is approved for the community college, sponsor its membership in the consortium of colleges and universities that links some seventeen post-secondary institutions within the region. Participation in the consortium offers numerous advantages, including access to faculty and staff development workshops and a cross-registration agreement that makes courses offered by any institution in the consortium available to all students at tuition rates of their home institution. Additionally, the university will be an advocate for the community college in its application for inclusion in a tuition reciprocity agreement that enables students who reside in one state within the tri-state metropolitan region to enroll at institutions in one of the other states at in-state tuition rates.

While many positive steps toward long-term collaboration have been taken, a few significant challenges must be addressed. The first of these challenges is regional accreditation for the new community college. Without accreditation of both partners, full articulation of courses and programs between the two institutions will be difficult to complete.

A second group of challenges involve reducing the potential for friction between the two institutions in the future. For example, the two institutions will work to coordinate recruitment strategies so that direct competition for students is minimized. Another area of potential friction is in fund-raising. Here again the institutions have agreed to coordinate development initiatives so that major campaigns are not taking place simultaneously. On occasion, there may also be opportunities to launch collaborative funding-raising projects such as those that could support shared off-campus instructional facilities.

There will also be a need to resolve the problem of the two partners not using the same student information system. This issue has slowed sharing of data related to cross-registered students. At the same time, student affairs and registrar personnel at the institutions have been creative in developing paper forms and reports that will fill this gap until the institutional systems can be integrated.

The partners will need to align non-credit training and professional development programs to area businesses, industries and governmental agencies so that duplication of programming and competition for clients can be avoided as much as possible. This alignment process is well underway.

Finally, sustaining the current spirit of mutual respect in which associate to baccalaureate collaboration can flourish will require regular contact and coordination of communication between the two partner institutions at every level including their presidents; chief academic officers; admissions and registrar's staffs, program faculty, and academic advisors. There is also an interest in initiating contact between the student governments of both institutions. Such contact can stimulate students' awareness of associate to baccalaureate transfer opportunities generally and participation in the dual admission program in particular.

Progress on partnership initiatives thus far suggests that these challenges to collaboration can and will be overcome by the partner institutions. Concerning the goal of coordinating training and professional development programs, for example, the community college has agreed to be a provider of certain types of workforce training within the larger framework of the university's education and training mission to business, industry, governmental agencies, and non-profit organizations in the region. The role of a "junior partner" in this enterprise is suited to the new community college because it can capitalize on the clientele it has cultivated in its previous incarnation as a technical college. Service to this clientele is part of a larger initiative to develop corporate clients for the university's education and training unit. The community college will provide clerical and technical training for employees while the university offers "high-end" professional development for managers and executives. Thus the strengths of each institution will complement each other in promoting a common educational objective.

Partnership as Learning Process

The experience of initiating a two-year/four-year institutional partnership unclouded by any history of competition for students, duplication of programs, or suspicions about academic quality has yielded the following observations about the importance of structuring new partnerships so as to promote the initial success of these agreements and to sustain their influence on student transfer rates from associate to baccalaureate institutions over time:

- 1. Begin the process with a clear declaration of support from top institutional leadership.** Regular and consistent statements by institutional leadership about the benefits that accrue from a two-year/four-year partnership will ensure that collaboration is initiated and sustained. The message must be carried to administrators, faculty, staff, and students at both institutions and to public constituencies in order to emphasize that collaboration is a priority and not a contingency in institutional planning.
- 2. Define, as early as possible, why the parties are interested in collaborating.** Meeting to agree, from the outset, on why the two institutions are at the table together and what is to be accomplished by the partnership is a critical first step toward fruitful collaboration. An initial set of common goals can be modified or refined if necessary as the process of collaboration proceeds.
- 3. Define clearly who will be involved in the creation and management of the partnership.** It is critical to include representatives from as many institutional levels and functional areas as possible when creating a two-year/four-year partnership (e.g. vice presidential areas; admissions, registration, and bursar's office personnel; department chairs and faculty; department chairs; and key support staff). Areas that have not been engaged in collaboration early in the process and thus are unaware of the project or its importance to the institutions can become unwitting barriers to successful implementation of a plan for collaboration.
- 4. Define clearly who is responsible for leading the formation of the partnership and for maintaining its viability.** Coordination of the partnership should be the joint responsibility of two team leaders, one from each institution. Each leader should have institutional authority adequate to eliminate or minimize potential obstacles (esp. in organizational structure and institutional policy) to the achievement of the goals of the partnership. That authority may be vested in the positions held by the team leaders within their respective institutions or it may be derived from a special executive appointment.
- 5. The partnership agreement should involve comprehensive planning.** The partnership should set out specific steps to ensure that cooperation between the two institutions is sustained over time. Such steps include defining goals as in Item 2 above, establishing a timeline for demonstrating progress toward meeting these goals, arranging a schedule of regular meetings where participants discuss issues and review progress, and agreeing on criteria for evaluating the effectiveness of the partnership as it develops. The plan should include an annual report on progress toward goals. This report should be reviewed by executive administrators at both institutions and the team leaders from each institution should be held accountable for meeting primary goals within the timeline set forth in the agreement.

Creating a two-year/four-year institutional partnership in an environment free of past problems of communication and perception offers an unobstructed perspective on the itinerary of post-secondary collaboration. It is possible, of course (perhaps even likely), that institutions with histories of competition, duplication, or even suspicion will find the work of collaboration more complicated or slower in its progress than the process described in this paper. Nevertheless, institutions that have a sincere desire to assist students in extending their post-secondary educational horizons beyond the associate degree, and who will accept the premise that collaboration works to the advantage of both two- and four-year institutions, may find in the collaborative experiences of an established university and a newly founded community college a pattern that can be adapted to their own specific circumstances. When the atmosphere of competition and tension that sometimes clouds two-year/four-year post-secondary partnerships can be dispelled by careful cooperative planning and the example of positive attitudes and statements on the part of institutional leaders, the likely outcome is enhanced educational opportunity for students and prospective students in the region served by the two institutions.

Similarly, the partner institutions themselves benefit in at least two ways. First, the process of forming a partnership offers the opportunity for the two institutions to work together to create coordinated and complementary post-secondary recruitment and retention strategies for the region. This coordination can lead to improved student retention for each institution. Second, a two-year/four-year partnership can be the stimulus for improving the level of cooperation, communication, and commitment among offices and individuals within each institution who must work together to ensure the success of collaborative activities. Together, the benefits to students and the partner institutions offer a strong incentive for initiating a two-year/four-year partnership project.

References

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