Perspectives in Collaboration

Collaboration is a word that is heard in every conversation, it seems, among colleagues in higher education. The frequency of the use of collaboration as part of a “strategy” or “strategic plan” has increased since the onset of the financial crisis. Yet, there is a lot more conversation than action when it comes to executing on collaborations. In these conversations, colleagues often note that “it always takes longer when more than one is involved” (you can fill in the blank with “department,” “division,” “college,” “university,” etc.). They also talk about the increased level of work required to make “it” happen—with “it” defined as a meeting, a project, or a decision, for example.

Part of the challenge may lie in the varied definitions of collaboration. Wikipedia defines collaboration as “a recursive process where two or more people or organizations work together to realize shared goals, (this is more than the intersection of common goals seen in co-operative ventures, but a deep, collective, determination to reach an identical objective)—for example, an intriguing endeavor that is creative in nature—by sharing knowledge, learning and building consensus. Most collaboration requires leadership, although the form of leadership can be social sus. Most collaboration requires leadership, although the form of leadership can be social sus. Most collaboration requires leadership, although the form of leadership can be social sus.

Examples of collaboration include the following:

- The July 2009 report “Higher Education and Collaboration in Global Context,” commissioned by U.K. Prime Minister Gordon Brown, made the case for U.S.-U.K. collaboration in higher education in third-party locations in order to maintain the primacy of both countries in light of the increasingly global context. The report focuses on extending the U.K.-U.S. models to foster the growth of accessible higher education in other nations.1

- The increase in global research collaboration has resulted in recent developments in Internet technologies, including high-performance computing, data mining, cloud computing, virtual resource and research environments, and “collaboratories.” Collaboration drives demand for communications infrastructure, which in turn drives new technologies and research.2

- An increasing number of “consortia” or numbers of institutions are working together to achieve enhanced intellectual creativity as well as administrative efficiencies: the Consortium for North American Higher Education Collaboration (http://www.conahec.org/), the Five Colleges, Incorporated (http://www.fivecolleges.edu/) in western Massachusetts, the Higher Education Consortium of Metro St. Louis (http://www.heccstl.com/), the Southern Colorado Education Consortium, the Boston Consortium for Higher Education (http://www.boston-consortium.org/)—and the list goes on.

In the Wikipedia definition given above, collaboration assumes that there are shared goals that have been defined and that there is implicit agreement that sharing and learning together will lead to a consensus on how to maximize the positive outcomes for all involved in the work. Adrianna Kezar and Jaime Lester discuss the collaboration imperative and the necessity of understanding the barriers to and logic of collaboration. They also outline various processes on the way toward the development of a collaborative context.3

In my experience, collaborations are much less defined and much more organic. Olin College was founded with the idea that the college would not reinvent the wheel when it came to facilities, programs, and services but would partner with nearby colleges such as Babson and Wellesley when the partnering made sense for all institutions. Based on this more top-down approach, cross-registration among the three colleges was one of the first projects undertaken. There were a number of joint faculty appointments between Babson and Olin Colleges. Olin College purchases services—such as the use of recreational, art studio, and spiritual life facilities—from Babson College. In addition, Olin College shares certain services, such as Public Safety, with Babson College. However, asking community members (e.g., faculty, staff, students) about the collaboration would likely result in a number of blank stares.

Last year, the presidents of Babson, Olin, and Wellesley Colleges announced an even deeper collaboration. Olin College, in Needham, is an engineering school. Babson College, in Wellesley and adjacent to Olin, emphasizes entrepreneurship and business. And Wellesley College (located two miles from Babson and Olin) is an all-women’s liberal arts college. By design, the presidents approached the collaboration as one that

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would be developed from the ground up, through the efforts of faculty, staff, and students.

Since the announcement of this collaboration, the bottom-up strategy seems to have created the synergies the presidents were hoping for. All three colleges sponsored the Engineering Grand Challenges Summit in Boston in April 2010, with each college providing various services and support (an example of Kezar and Lester’s synergy of successful practices). A director of the Three College Collaboration was appointed. The director has taken the lead with the academic endeavors. For example, intercollegiate relationship faculty committees have been established on each campus, faculty are working together on joint certificate programs, students participated in joint intercession projects on pedagogy and learning and then presented to a faculty workshop, the student governments meet and work together, and there were social events for faculty and students.

On the administrative side of the collaboration, a cross-dining program allows cross-registered students to dine on any of the campuses in order to promote student interactions, a plan for reciprocal parking for faculty and staff is in progress, a website has been created, an IT staff reception was held, and an all-staff reception is planned for April 2011. In all, there are close to thirty project teams working on topics as diverse as space planning and sharing, library services, learning management systems, IT connectivity, health management initiatives, summer programs, and shared staff/expertise. Social networking, the building of relationships both in person and electronically, by a larger number of community members has had a positive impact on the awareness of the collaboration and the willingness of community members to participate. Regular meetings are a must for keeping the communication channels wide open.

To answer the most likely questions: yes, collaboration does take time and effort and leadership, and yes, it can be challenging (especially when working with very distinct cultures), but sometimes it takes less time than a decision on one campus alone if all three institutions and presidents have focused on collaboration as a priority. In our case, the campus communities have responded to the vision of the three presidents by embracing the opportunity to increase the level and amount of resources available.

So, what does this have to do with a CIO? A collaboration is a great opportunity for a CIO to step up and lead in support of a priority of his/her president and the presidents of the partner institutions. It is also an opportunity for the CIO to understand varying viewpoints from different institutions and to work with his/her colleagues on cross-campus, integrated solutions that improve the experience of all the students, faculty, and staff and that contribute to a complete and seamless 24x7x365 global collaboration for community members. This is a tall order, but it is one that enhances the CIO’s role and expands the CIO’s strategic influence.

Notes

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