

NITLE Collaboration Consulting Program

Operationalizing Inter-Institutional Collaboration

Principles of Collaboration

The development of a program with multiple stakeholders requires facilitators to create clear expectations, foster information sharing, follow through on problem-solving, and track progress. Facilitating collaboration requires organizing stakeholders around a common model that is congruent with sought after outcomes and intersecting ambitions. The NITLE collaboration program includes tools that address the principles of successful collaboration listed below.

Problem Definition and Scope/Statement of purpose

The most critical element of collaboration is a clear understanding of the shared (or intersecting) goals that justify inter-institutional collaboration. The success or failure of collaboration more often depends on the strength of this element more than anything else. If the rationale is strong enough, money, staff time, etc. will be found; if the goals are not intrinsic (e.g., if the collaboration is motivated by externalities that may vanish at any time) then ultimately the collaboration will be jeopardized.

Collaborations are opportunities to accomplish together what can't be done alone. They represent opportunity to solve a shared problem, or meet a common challenge that is clearly and easily relatable to the needs of the participating institutions. In sustained collaborations everyone around the table -- all of the roles represented at all levels -- see the value in pursuing the program opportunity. It is clearly defined and articulated and easily communicated to others, whether they are potential supporters like foundations or future partners. Successful, sustained collaboration avoid the trap of leaping to solutions before adequately identifying the shared problem or opportunity. Time is taken to clearly identify and define the common problem to solve. Getting to that clarity may take work but it is worth the effort. A successful collaboration is also scoped appropriately: it is big enough and ambitious enough to require partners working together yet small enough to actually accomplish the stated objective. Defining the problem and scoping it well helps us understand the limits of what can be accomplish.

Identifying/Cultivating Sponsorship and Champions

Sustained collaborations have the benefit of executive sponsorship whether from the president or the provost or the Trustees. The defined opportunity is clear and senior leadership and other sponsors can easily get behind it in a productive and *persistent* manner. While not a guarantee, sponsorship is helpful in weathering organizational and funding storms down the road.

In addition to program sponsors, successful collaborations have one or more public and active champions who are willing, able, and eager to go to bat for the collaboration. Champions need not be a part of the collaboration proper. Champions can be found in campus presidents, provosts, deans, CIOs, Librarians, technologists, faculty, as well as corporate and industry leaders. The extent to which they can easily share the statement of purpose and the opportunity, the easier it will be for them to remain enthusiastic champions in the service of the collaboration.

As Kristine Bartanen, Academic Vice President and Dean of the University, at the University of Puget Sound recently noted, “An additional component necessary for consortial success is articulate champions. Presidents, trustees, chief academic officers, chief financial officers, and other college leaders need to be aware of consortial initiatives, actively support the goals and objectives of the work, and - perhaps most important of all - be articulate spokespersons for the outcomes and impacts of collaborative projects. There is much ‘press about the need for colleges to restrain costs and approach educational work in new ways; leaders who can tell the good stories of successful consortial work will be critical to sustaining collaborative work, particularly when start-up funding ends and institutional financial commitments are required for the longer term.”

Champions help galvanize the collaboration. To that end, a program of “ongoing persuasion and motivation is needed to sustain collaborative work.” Presidents, trustees, senior administrative staff - indeed leadership at all levels of the institution - must be provided a strong narrative at every phase of the collaboration to ensure success. Champions require stories to share about the rationale supporting the collaboration and the measurable outcomes that will benefit participants. Developing that narrative and getting into the hands of sponsors and champions is a key component of a successful collaboration.

Organizational Capacity, Adaptability, and Leadership

Inter-institutional collaborations are frequently initiated in a flurry of enthusiasm and individual energy. As part of the planning process - and before finalizing plans for a collaborative effort - a review of organizational capacity and adaptability are required to ensure sustainability beyond initial enthusiasm. Specifically, participants should review the statement of purpose, problem definition and scope to identify and develop the organizational resources and relationships necessary for a sustained program.

In sustained collaborations the work must become more than a project temporarily layered over pre-existing responsibilities of an individual or a department. It speaks to an institutional opportunity. It becomes *programmatic*. It evolves away from a project, a temporary exploration of possibilities, and becomes a program that is somehow a part of the organizational DNA. On the other hand, projects in which the work remains isolated to an individual personality, or is persistently separate or special – somehow *in addition to* the pre-existing duties – will have a much more difficult time being sustained. This is where sponsorship, champions, and a clearly defined statement of purpose will be helpful. If the project is attached to a personality, or on top of, or in addition to pre-existing workflow, decisions about continued participation in such efforts inevitably get made based on other priorities. The work is in danger of being deemed a distraction rather than fundamental and programmatic.

In planning for a sustained collaboration it is critical to evaluate capacity and adaptability and develop a plan to ensure that the initiative becomes programmatic.

Leadership and Administration

The framework within which the participants will work together is the first and most important understanding a consortium needs to establish. This task centers on a cluster of three questions: 1) What decisions need to be made? 2) Who decides and stands accountable? and 3) How are the decisions made and implemented?¹ The range of decisions that need to be made is often unknown (or only partially known at the outset of a collaboration). They require careful attention at the outset of a collaborative project but are all too frequently overlooked or underdeveloped in the initial enthusiasm and optimism of working together.

¹ J.W. Ross and P. Weill, "Six IT Decisions Your IT People Shouldn't Make," Center for Information Systems Research, Sloan School of Management, MIT, October 2002.

A big challenge of working in a group that spans institutional boundaries is that there is no ready-made organization of responsibilities, tasks, processes, and communications--all of which are essential to collaboration. Weakness in even one of these areas can weaken a project and eventually undermine the others. Project administration is one of the first tasks those charged with governance need to address.

Staffing

Administration and implementation require time and talent. The right staff need to be assigned, and their time and attention needs to be assured for the project to unfold properly. In most cases, these staff are only contributing a share of their availability to the consortium project: they all still have primary responsibilities at their home institutions. While the collaborative project will be in some respects an added burden for these individuals, it will also be a unique opportunity for them to enjoy working with new colleagues and developing their own skills and experience. In many inter-institutional collaborations additional (though often temporary) staff may be hired.

Support

The key resource in any project is staff time. But facilities, equipment, additional assistance and expertise are also essential. These require special attention in a consortium setting because their availability and authorization for a collaborative project cannot be taken for granted. It is also inevitable that any project will encounter problems and needs for change of specifications or schedule. When the original plans and resources face challenges, prompt and effective support is necessary. That support is more likely to be possible if contingencies have been planned in advance.

Funding

The bedrock for a successful project is sure and adequate funding. The amount of money required depends in turn on adequate attention to each of the preceding topic areas: governance, administration, staffing, and support--each of which has cost implications. Because collaborative projects typically fall outside the scope of each institution's normal funding for its own activities, the sources and amounts of funding need to be carefully specified at the outset.

Scheduling Structured External Evaluation

In an extended, sustained, collaboration it may make sense to retain an external individual or agency to document progress. Having the benefit of an unbiased eye to review the collaboration program plan, objectives, and scheduled outcomes can provide utility during and after the program.

When the program is grant funded, scheduled reports from an external reviewer can inform grant reports. Developing a library of documentation can be helpful in subsequent project planning as well as in future fundraising.

Planning for Inclusion and Expansion

Sustained collaborations are extensible; they are inclusive and expansive to a larger community, beyond that of the founders. Successful collaborations go beyond the individual and the immediate. When thinking through the problem definition and scope, planners do well to include the means to create a conduit to present to the work to the world through case studies, articles, essays, workshops, summer institutes, etc. The NITLE program will help planners build this potential into the program plan and schedule the resources to execute a communication plan.

Cultivating Trust and Vulnerability

Explore vulnerability as a positive. Through transparency and openness new potential can be realized. All of this requires trust. It can be a challenge to be vulnerable enough to work together in a public manner, show work before it is "finished," and allow others to work collaboratively on it, or even see it, before it is "polished" to satisfaction. It can be hard for some to let down their guard and allow others to re-work their contributions, and insert their own in its place. To really work together requires a level of trust and vulnerability and a safe environment to foster these. We need to be able to trust in order to achieve that level of honest collaboration.

Negotiation

Collaborations require negotiation and agreement. The NITLE program tools will guide participants through the process of developing and implementing negotiated collaboration. Specific steps will be followed that enable a cohort to:

- Work towards agreement on the opportunity, the mission, and the values and principles of the proposed collaboration.
- Design and implement a collaboration model with a clear organizational structure.
- Set milestones and timeframes for the project.
- Determine and publish meeting guidelines.
- Define roles and responsibilities.
- Create an effective project management and communication plan.
- Coordinate budget and fund development.
- Identify and connect with other initiatives as appropriate.
- Promote and market the collaboration.
- Build the leadership capacity of all stakeholders.
- Enlist technical assistance and support.