

A Model for Collaboration in Multi-Institutional Graduate Programs

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The GPIDEA (Great Plains Interactive Distance Education Alliance) is an organization of deans of Human Ecology colleges at primarily Land-Grant Universities from the Great Plains region. The alliance initially included Iowa State University, Kansas State University, Montana State University, the University of Missouri, North Dakota State University, Oklahoma State University, South Dakota State University and Texas Tech University. One of the goals of the organization is to share resources in order to provide graduate education programs for niche-markets where none of the individual institutions have sufficient faculty to offer the program alone. The first program that the GPIDEA proposed was a master's degree in Family Financial Planning. The FFP degree was conceived to be delivered entirely over the internet and the instruction to be provided by faculty from each of the seven institutions now participating in the program.

The GPIDEA deans quickly recognized that for an internet-based degree program involving seven different institutions, each with their different traditions, policies and procedures, it was going to be necessary to obtain the support of an array of academic and administrative units on each of the campuses. As a result, the graduate deans from all of the institutions were brought into the discussion in a face-to-face meeting early in the process. The magnitude of the challenge of constructing a working arrangement and the potential significance of a successful model for use by alliances led to the submission of a FIPSE proposal to the Department of Education. The proposal, entitled "A National Model for Inter-institutional Postbaccalaureate Education Programs" was funded and provided the resources to bring together, over a three year period, the key players from each institution to discuss and resolve hindrances and roadblocks. The participants included the dean and a faculty member from the human ecology college, the graduate dean, dean of student services, dean of continuing education, the Registrar and the appropriate financial officer from each campus.

One of the keys to success was a decision early on by the graduate deans to write a "white paper" of principles of cooperation prior to working out the details of that cooperation. That "white paper" follows in abbreviated form:

Principle 1: The participating graduate schools mutually respect the academic standards and quality of the academic departments involved in this joint program, therefore:

- A. Courses approved for delivery by this program will not be considered to be transfer courses.
- B. Graduate faculty status at their home institution will be required, no further approval will be required by the other members of the alliance.
- C. Students admitted to this program will be accepted automatically by all other members.
- D. The number of students that may be admitted will be determined by agreements between all participating institutions.
- E. The content of the curriculum will be determined by agreement of the participating institutions.

Principle 2: The participating graduate schools recognize that the implementation of the Family Financial Planning program at each institution may be best accomplished using procedures and practices that are inherent to those respective institutions, therefore:

- A. The Family Financial Planning program may be a stand alone major, an emphasis, an option or other designation as is appropriate to the respective universities.
- B. Students in this program who are degree-seeking at one institution will be classified appropriately at each other institution to facilitate enrollment in and completion of the curriculum provided by the other institutions.
- C. Admissions procedures for students will be determined by their home institution within the standards and limitations on numbers agreed to by the participating institutions.
- D. Each individual university is responsible for obtaining initial approval and approval of any changes of the program through the processes that are in place and required by their respective institutions.
- E. The students' home university will utilize the same deadlines and procedures as used for its other degree-seeking students.
- F. Each institution will transcript courses taken at partner institutions, as it deems appropriate.

Principle 3: The participating graduate schools commit to minimize the unique challenges and barriers for students that might otherwise occur in an inter-institutional distance education program to the extent possible, therefore:

- A. Students will not be charged an application fee except at their home institution.
- B. Each institution will facilitate the transfer of information without cost to students.
- C. A common database of admissions and related information will be developed to reduce duplication of effort required of students.
- D. Each institution will facilitate verification of data for financial aid, full time status and other issues as needed.

The existence of the white paper served as the principle vehicle for resolving roadblocks for the graduate deans. Perhaps more importantly, it set the tone for expected cooperation for resolving the issues that would arise as a result of different practices on each of the campuses in areas ranging from financial to transcript considerations. Although the white paper was developed for an internet delivered, distance education collaborative program, it is equally applicable for any collaborative graduate degree program. It is clear that the white paper was a key accomplishment that led to the success of the cooperation between the institutions. Other keys to success for any inter-institutional program included getting the graduate deans involved early in the process, organizing the institutional teams and designating a "point person" for each campus. The campus coordinator keeps the momentum going on each campus as well as keeping the sandy grains of details from jamming the gears of the progress. ♦