

Inter-Institutional Academic Partnerships: Compliance and Conflict with Institutional Policies and Practices

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In higher education, academic programs are supported by an intricate scaffolding of institutional policies and practices. These policies and practices can support or impede inter-institutional academic partnerships.

Individuals who represent their institution in the leadership team for an inter-institutional academic venture need to be well informed about institutional policies and practices. Although most institutions have mechanisms for granting policy exceptions, sustainable partnerships require a stable policy and practice scaffolding—not a web of policy and practice exceptions held together with duct tape and baling wire.

Rules

Faced with an array of institutional rules, alliance leaders will need to negotiate a pathway through them.

Is it a rule? Institutional rules can support or impede inter-institutional program development and deployment. Rules in higher education are interesting phenomena. Sometimes what is perceived as a binding obligation is at most an oral tradition. Other times what is thought to be optional is actually obligatory. The work of academic administrators and faculty is subject to many institutional policies and practices that the affected administrators and faculty cannot change to advance their own program's purposes—even when the purpose is lofty.

Whose rule is it? Although rules impact practice throughout the academy, rules always come with an address. The first step in changing a rule is to determine its address—the place where responsibility for enforcing or changing the rule rests. The responsible entity can, and frequently does, change the rule to make it more supportive of emerging needs.

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What is the intent of the rule? Rules are invoked frequently in inter-institutional collaborations as the rationale for why something cannot be done or to explain why an idea would put institutional standards at risk. Used this way, limitations attributed to rules may actually be excuses for inaction. Institutional standards do require protection—rules can be crafted that maintain institutional standards and support inter-institutional distance education programs.

Responsibilities

The development of inter-institutional academic programs engages faculty in the development of new programs of study and engages administrators in the development of new policies and practices to govern the inter-institutional program. Essential to the success of inter-institutional academic endeavors is the assurance that faculty are responsible for the curriculum and administrators are responsible for policy. Confusing these roles makes participants frustrated and the alliance fragile.

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Continued on Page 2

Faculty participants in inter-institutional program and course sharing partnerships find themselves bound to their institutional workload, compensation, annual evaluation, and promotion policies and linked to both institutional and inter-institutional teaching and curriculum development responsibilities. Institutional academic administrators need to manage the departmental and institutional cultures to assure that faculty participation in inter-institutional academic partnerships is a valued activity that warrants workload and resource accommodation, that is regarded as a departmental and institutional priority, and that provides more opportunities than costs for faculty participants.

Principles

The principles that guide most civil human interaction are implicit. When principles are implicit, they are individually perceived and applied. In partnership endeavors, implicit principles are always at work, and they are generally helpful. However, any partnership that links competitors in a collaborative endeavor will need to make these implicit principles explicit. When principles are explicitly stated, they can be benchmarks for practice. These deceptively simple core principles of the Great Plains IDEA guide policy and practice in powerful ways: 1) Behave as equals, 2) Respect Institutional Differences, 3) Simplify Student Navigation.

Collaboration, Compromise, and Competition

Balance collaboration and competition. Unless a joint venture has strategic academic value for the institution, do not join it. Alliances that last over time are those that result in win-win outcomes in which tangible benefits accrue to all partners.

Approval of any inter-institutional academic course or program will require the scrutiny of institutional review teams. No steps can be short circuited. Full disclosure of plans from idea to implementation allows for the necessary institutional input to the inter-institutional planning team.