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AUTHOR Miller, Michael T.; Evans, Jennifer P.
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ABSTRACT

A study identified potential barriers to successful intra-institutional collaboration involving educators at secondary schools, community colleges, community education agencies, and higher education institutions. Twenty educators from various educational agencies in Alabama and Georgia were identified to be included in the interview process by using a snowball technique. All individual were interviewed in person. Notes were taken during each interview and provided to each participant for amendment, correction, or editing. Analysis of interview notes indicated moderate duplication in many noncredit, nondegree programs. Organizational collaboration was seen as having the ability to enhance the range and depth of courses and to allow for greater organizational flexibility in offering courses. The primary barrier to working with other educational providers was miscommunication among program directors, teachers, and other managers and administrators. These other barriers were identified: pressure to maintain academic freedom and control of the classroom, teachers who preferred to "teach to the test," rapid turn around time in local industry incentive training, tradition, attitude of college professors, energy and incentive for teachers to communicate with colleagues at other providers, the "make-a-buck" attitude in self-supporting programs, and administration of various agencies. (YLB)

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In Pursuit of Seamless Education:

Collaboration Between Educational Sectors

Michael T. Miller, Ed.D.
Associate Professor
Higher Education Administration Program
University of Alabama
Box 870302
Tuscaloosa, AL 35487
(205) 348-1170
FAX: (205) 348-2161
e-mail: mmiller@bamaed.ua.edu

Jennifer P. Evans, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor
Educational Leadership Program
University of Alabama
Box 870302
Tuscaloosa, AL 35487
(205) 348-6060
FAX: (205) 348-2161

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Abstract

Virtually all forms of educational institutions provide for similar outcomes: the education of learners. Regardless of institutional scope and mission, the articulation of educational institutions provides one of the fastest growing and dynamic issues facing educators in all forms of institutions and organizations. The current study was designed to identify potential barriers to successful intra-institutional collaboration, involving educators at secondary schools, community colleges, community education agencies, and higher education institutions. Through structured interviews, the primary challenge of effective communication between institutions was identified as the primary inhibitor to successful collaboration.

Pressures for institutional accountability have grown to an all time high, and with these pressures have been public outcries for evidence that educational institutions are achieving the goals for which they receive private, state, and federal support. Even private institutions, whether secondary, occupational, or postsecondary, have come to accept that they must be able to demonstrate their effectiveness to prospective students, faculty, trustees, and their constituents. One of the overarching results of this press for accountability has been the drive to develop collaborative agreements among institutions. Growing largely from the applied academics movement of the late-1980's and with federal backing in the 1990 Carl Perkins legislation, intra-institutional relationships provide concrete evidence to constituents that learners have met minimum criteria acceptable at and to other institutions.

The most common form of intra-institutional collaboration has been, and continues to be tech-prep agreements between secondary schools and typically their local postsecondary provider. These agreements allow for learners to complete an initial program of study in the secondary school which is completed through enrollment at a postsecondary institution. Similar to pre-professional education programs, such as pre-med and pre-law undergraduate college majors, collaborative efforts based on articulation have become increasingly popular as enrollment

in an educational institution has become equated with job preparation. Another form of collaboration between secondary and postsecondary institutions which has grown widely in recent years is that of the Professional Development School which allows for the education of students, preparation of teachers, experimentation with teaching techniques, research opportunities, and inservice and feedback for teachers (Rakow & Robinson, 1997). Concepts such as these have commonly been referred to as part of the "seamless" educational movement, as they provide educational preparation among institutions without a break in content.

The seamless education movement has also been viewed in the framework of life-long learning, where formal enrollment in an institution does not mean an end to learning. This "perpetual learning" provides a basis not only for retraining and retooling for employment, but also, and perhaps more importantly, for leisure education and education for the sake of self-improvement and learning. The primary providers for these learning products has been a combination of local, public providers, along with community and junior college continuing education divisions. The difficulty for these providers is two-fold: first, to assess prior learning, where applicable, and second, to provide a cost-competitive program which does not entirely

duplicate but rather enhances the availability of learning opportunities.

The results of this competition in many municipalities are non-fulfilled capacities in terms of courses and programs of study. For instance, food preparation programs offered through a local community college often find competition through local college or university continuing education programs, local merchants, and other civic groups, such as city councils, youth associations, and municipal secondary providers (libraries, museums, etc.). The problem to be addressed, then, is how to deal effectively with either for-credit or non-credit programs which provide educational opportunities. Additionally, the articulation between programs becomes a secondary issue to be dealt with by educators, in the hopes that program redundancy can be reduced to better utilize the availability of public funds and in meeting the needs of potential customers.

Procedures

Sample

A total of 20 educators from various educational agencies in Alabama and Georgia were identified to be included in the interview process. This sample included five secondary school principals and superintendents, five continuing education directors at four-year colleges and universities, five community and junior college community or

continuing education directors, and five community education program coordinators, including agencies such as museums, YMCAs, municipal entities, and health care providers (see Appendix 1 for sample position titles of those interviewed). These individuals were identified utilizing a snowball technique, where the participant identified was asked to identify another individual who might have similar credentials and be willing to participate in the study.

Interview Strategy

All of the 20 individuals identified were interviewed in person between February and May 1997. Sample questions included in the interviews are included in Appendix 2. Through interviews with these leaders, a residual effect from the study was hoped to be the identification of factors to be included in a future survey instrument, thus allowing for generalizability to larger populations of pubic education providers. Notes were taken during each interview, and were provided, in typed-format to each participant. The individual being interviewed then had an opportunity to amend, correct, or otherwise edit the interview notes. These interview notes then served as the source of data for analysis.

Results

What is provided: Respondents provided a detailed listing of types of courses and programs of study offered, inclusive of associate and baccalaureate degree programs, leisure education programs (travel, foreign culture, cooking, home crafts, regional culture, etc.), literacy programs, business and industry incentive programs (job training as well as employee relocation introduction to the community, etc.), civic welfare programs (neighborhood leadership and crime prevention), and wellness programs. Moderate duplication existed in many of the non-credit, non-degree programs, illustrating a "friendly competition among various institutions," as one respondent stated. Another participant said "we find most competition for the courses and programs among average adults, people who want to learn about some foreign country or more about our town. The competition really can be quite serious."

Funding: Most of the programs offered operated in one of several funding combinations: user fees (tuition), user fees which are subsidized by a public (state or federal) entity, sponsored by the organization with no cost to participants, and sponsored by a third party (foundation). "We find it is the most difficult to recruit students for programs which are funded by a foundation or trust...we get the money and have to find a way to make sure people are involved so that we can show a return on that investment to

the (foundation) board," said a participant from a municipal organization. A participant from a 4-year university indicated that the process of making money from continuing education activities was a serious undertaking. "Our goal is to make money for the school while providing a valuable service to the community. Unfortunately, a lot of people think that we can magically make dollars appear simply by offering a course. What they don't understand is that we have to be very careful about what we offer, how we offer it, and what the profit margin is. As much as we would like to, we can't offer programs that will loose money for the school."

Client uniqueness: Each of the individuals interviewed indicated that they believed their clientele to be entirely unique, with the exception of those enrolled in adult literacy programs. For the adult literacy program clientele, respondents stated that they believed participation was determined largely by chance and personal relationships. "In our literacy program, we get mostly personal references, people who know someone who convinces them to come in and talk to one of us...its really hit or miss, and if we hit, great, if they (the university) get a hit, then great...I think we all put our pocketbooks aside when it comes to literacy programs." The greatest competition was viewed for degree seeking students (between 2-year colleges and 4-year colleges) and for leisure

education programs (between all segments). The least competition was viewed as existing in the offering of secondary education programs.

Collaboration: Organizational collaboration was viewed as a positive force in the offering of educational programs, being seen as something which has both the ability to enhance the range and depth of courses of study, as well as allowing for greater organizational flexibility in offering courses. Specific advantages of collaboration identified by participants included: more course selection, greater access to courses and programs of study, lower costs, more emphasis placed on the outcomes of courses, teachers being held accountable to the next teacher, and an ability to "capture the market and bring each learner through a structured learning program which demonstrates how life-long learning can be practiced."

Barriers to collaboration: The primary barrier to working with other educational providers identified was that of miscommunication between program directors, teachers, and other managers and administrators. Often, respondents claimed, one segment of the educational network would make dramatic alterations in order to invigorate or improve their individual performance. These alterations transfer to other providers slowly, "they (the college) change things all the time; when they offer a class, what classes they are offering, workshops, everything, you name it...they don't

tell us what they're doing and they don't have to, but you pick up the paper and find out that the college is doing something you were planning on doing next week." A secondary school principal said "we are very cautious with what we set out to do, and typically we have to have a teacher or someone go out of their way to make sure the town council isn't planning on doing the same thing. We find that if we want to offer a local history program, or something like that, then we have to plan a year in advance and we have to tell the world about. There are no surprises in providing community services!"

Other barriers identified included: pressure to maintain academic freedom and control of the classroom, teachers who prefer to "teach to the test so that their kids can go to college," rapid turn around time in local industry incentive training, tradition, "the attitude of college professors," the energy and incentive for teachers to communicate with their colleagues at other providers, "the make a buck attitude in self-supporting (continuing education) programs," and the administration of various agencies.

Discussion

The current study was not intended to provide a broad-based approach to identifying all of the difficulties associated with inter-institutional collaboration, but rather, demonstrates that even highly prized relationships

among individuals and institutions can be difficult to establish and maintain. Perhaps the most clearly identified barrier was the lack of communication between institutions. Due to governing board functions and roles, administrative beliefs and values, and even faculty wishes for classroom control, the institutions described in this study illustrate the lack of commitment to communicating about education in their respective communities. For serious educational reform to become effective, either through collaborative agreements or through other mechanisms, educational leaders must learn to respect and effectively communicate how best to provide the service of education to their local communities.

In an effort to establish more meaningful methods of communication, communities should embark on self-directed and self-imposed educational audits to identify program duplication, potential strengths and weaknesses in a 'web of community education,' and to share valuable information (market research) about the educational needs of consumers. Educational programs are offered through a large number of providers, and until educational institutions learn to compliment rather than compete with their fellow institutions, state legislatures and public constituencies will continue to demand greater accountability, often in the form of blanket budget reductions.

Educators, whether teachers or administrators committed to community education programs, must learn to identify common goals and means of maximizing their capital. Primarily human capital allows educational institutions to excel, and the ability and willingness of institutions to collaborate presents perhaps the most lucrative market for the investment of this capital. The success or failure of education in the near future, then, is highly related to the unity these organizations can develop and sustain and financial and perceptual currents rise and fall.

Reference

Rakow, S. J., & Robinson, L. W. (1997). School and university partnerships: Teaming for success. Contemporary Education, 68(2), 143-147.

Appendix 1

Sample Titles of Those Interviewed

Director of Continuing Education (4-year university)
Continuing and Community Education Coordinator (4-year college)
Program Specialist (4-year college)
Coordinator of Community and Continuing Education (2-year college)
Coordinator of Economic Development and Continuing Education (2-year college)
Dean of Instruction (2-year college)
Director of Articulation Programs (secondary school)
Principal (secondary school)
Superintendent of Schools (secondary school)
Tech-Prep Coordinator (secondary school)
Director of Community Education (municipal museum)
Continuing Education Coordinator (health care agency)
Community Services Specialist (municipal government)
Project Specialist (municipal government)

Appendix 2

Sample Questions For Public Education Providers

1. What types of educational opportunities do you provide? For credit? Non-credit? Are these formal programs, or isolated courses? Does anyone in your community provide similar courses?

2. What is the primary funding source for your provision of these courses? To what extent is the state or federal government involved in subsidizing these courses and programs?

3. When considering how you market these courses and programs, do you find any similarity among your markets and those of other providers?

4. To what extent, if any, do you collaborate with other providers in offering courses and programs? What about in offering conferences, institutes, and workshops?

5. Do you perceive any barriers to collaborating with colleagues at other institutions or with other organizations? If so, what do you see are the primary and secondary barriers? What are the strengths of your collaboration? Your weakness?

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Organization: University of Alabama Higher Educ Admin Program Position: Associate Professor

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