# ACHIEVING DIVERSITY THROUGH ONLINE INTER-INSTITUTIONAL COLLABORATIONS

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines best practices for technology use in online, collaborations between the University of Illinois at Springfield and Chicago State University in class sessions shared across institutional boundaries. We explore the collaborations between these two ethnically and culturally diverse institutions. The University of Illinois at Springfield received two grants in the fall of 2004 to address the challenge of encouraging diversity in online and on campus classes. One grant, from the Illinois Board of Higher Education supported the development of online collaborations between classes at UIS with a student population that is approximately 9% ethnic minority and Chicago State University with a student population that is more than 90% ethnic. Highlighted are synchronous and asynchronous exchanges using Elluminate Live's synchronous, web-based two–way audio conferencing and Blackboard's asynchronous discussion board technologies.

## KEYWORDS

Diversity, Inter-institutional Collaboration, Shared Classes

## I.   INTRODUCTION

Innovation comes from breaking down barriers in our thoughts and patterns of behavior, seeing new connections, and finding ways to use our resources to build something better. As institutions compete for students and dollars, we seek innovative ideas to help us stay ahead or, at least, not lose ground. But innovation comes at a glacial pace to higher education because much of what we do is steeped in traditional rhetoric. This rhetoric defines our role as subscribing to a devotion to student learning, devotion to teaching, broader access for all, and community service. Yet, in today's marketplace there is much to challenge these roles [1].

The context of higher education in the 21st century is one of change. Information and knowledge are growing at an ever accelerating rate. Time and distance barriers are dissolving through real and virtual connections and networks. The basic assumptions underlying campus and geographically-confined learning communities are dissolving. Competition has arisen from the unexpected quarter of for-profit universities. All of these changes bring both challenges and opportunities. Communication and networking technologies provide conduits through which institutions, their faculty and their students can collaborate in ways that were impossible just a decade ago. Spurred by competition and the need to address the explosion of information and knowledge, we are pushed toward finding new ways to work together.

Historically, cooperative and collaborative examples abound in higher education. While not necessarily ground-breaking, inter-institutional collaboration efforts bring innovations that transcend the traditional functions of enrollment, procurement, and curricular delivery that were established to serve the brick and

mortar institution. Credit banking, curricular partnerships, and library consortia were early opportunities for collaboration.

In 1988, the Open Learning Agency (OLA) in British Columbia developed an educational credit bank, an innovative service called the British Columbia Educational Credit Bank. This bank continues to exist today and "allows students to accumulate transfer credits for formal courses and programs taken at publicly funded educational institutions. It also provides for the flexible assessment of non-formal learning and the recognition of this as a credit towards an OLA credential through OLA's Open University and Open College (OU/OC) [2].

As early as 1983, three universities in Australia—Deakin, Murdoch, and Queensland—collaborated to offer a woman's study major that none of the institutions could offer on its own. The program has proved highly successful, and it enables students to enroll in the program at their "home" institutions. "Inter-university enrolment is open only to students who have already completed other courses at their home university. Special administrative arrangements have been made for inter-university enrolment, study activities, assessment, and recording of results in the Major" [3].

In 1975, the Research Libraries Group was formed by the New York Public Library, Columbia, Yale and Harvard Universities. Now referred to as RLG, it has grown from the four founding institutions to included over one hundred of the world's most advanced research libraries and institutions. The mission of the group is to support researchers by expanding access to research materials and to promote standards and practices [4]. In the 29 years since its founding, the RLG has grown to become one of the premiere examples of library consortia, yet it is but a single example of the myriad of existing library partnerships. Libraries are not unique in using consortia to expand bibliographic and other data, but they are some of the most adaptable and durable partnerships.

In the past, institutions that established collaborations commonly did so to solve problems in staffing, enrollment, or to provide cost efficiencies. But, the fierce individual autonomy of institutions of higher learning and the complexities of the bureaucratic structures within institutions have historically created substantial roadblocks to inter-institutional collaboration. In this case study, we outline a collaboration where two institutions are building bridges to meet the mutual challenges they face in diversity, resources, and enrollment. With significantly different student populations and geographically separated by some two-hundred miles, these two institutions have been able to overcome autonomy and communication issues to create a collaboration that addresses shared needs.

## II.   COLLABORATION BETWEEN THE UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS AT SPRINGFIELD AND CHICAGO STATE UNIVERSITY

In 2002, the Illinois Board of Higher Education (IBHE) under the auspices of the Higher Education Cooperation Act (HECA) funded the first of what has proven to be a continuing grant to support collaboration between the University of Illinois at Springfield (UIS) and Chicago State University (CSU). Both are public non-profit institutions in the state of Illinois. Both sought to use online delivery of classes to reach previously untapped populations of students. The original partnership sought to expand CSU's online program by building on the experience UIS had in online technologies and to allow UIS to promote the Sloan Consortium model of asynchronous learning networks (ALN) to CSU. The UIS Office of Technology-Enhanced Learning (OTEL) assisted CSU in developing its online learning presence and has promoted an increase in the numbers of students able to navigate the web to seek information related to most all disciplines as they pursue and complete credit bearing courses. UIS provided training and

development workshops both in Chicago and in Springfield for CSU faculty and staff members on topics including online learning tools and best practices in the use of specialized software to enhance Web instruction.

In 2004, the success of this continuing relationship between the CSU Office of Distance Learning (ODL) and OTEL led to a expansion of the HECA proposal which would encourage faculty members at the two institutions to collaborate together in the use of web-based technologies, learn effective practices from one another, and enable students to share a common learning environment in which diverse perspectives and experiences could be exchanged. The IBHE funded the proposal for online mentoring and collaboration between UIS and CSU faculty members. The HECA grant proposal stated: "In addition to the workshops for online learning tools, CSU and UIS propose to form an Online Teaching Partnership" [5]. This program identifies and supports faculty members who wish to work with peers at the partnering institution.

The model for this mentoring is the joining of selected classes for all or part of the term in shared online environments—such as those provided by the Blackboard course management system and the Elluminate synchronous web conferencing system. Students enroll in classes at their respective institutions; faculty members are responsible for the grading, advising and assessment of their own students' work. The shared online environment enables scalable levels of team-teaching to be determined by the faculty members involved, including modeling and mentoring of effective practices by the experienced faculty member. The shared class environment also provides the opportunity for students from the two institutions to communicate, collaborate and work together through projects, discussions and other assignments.

Class collaborations began in the fall of 2004. The first collaboration occurred as a group project between CSU's Technology and Education and UIS's EDL 547 Educational Leadership. The CSU course consisted of eight pre-service elementary education majors while the UIS course consisted of 20 students, mostly in-service educators. The students were assigned to groups of three (two from UIS and one from CSU). An EDL547 group project surveying technology- leading schools was modified by the instructors. The instructors divided the survey project into three phases and defined timelines for the work to be submitted. Student groups were asked to identify and interview a technology-leading school in one of three geographic areas of Illinois: City of Chicago, North of Interstate 80 and South of Interstate 80. Elluminate's web-based, audio conferencing software was the primary communication tool for group interaction and was chosen by most of the groups as the tool for performing the school interviews. Groups alternated leadership roles for the three separate units, developed criteria for selecting technology-leading school, arranged and conducted an interview, and composed a report of the interview findings.

The collaboration resulted in several interesting outcomes. The student reviews of technology-leading programs included areas of Illinois not normally represented when the assignment had been given without the collaboration with CSU. Because it relies on delayed posts and replies, asynchronous communication tends to take a while to establish group consensus. Fifty-two percent of students reported using Elluminate to create consensus on which direction the group should take when a decision had to be made. Another 23% reported using Elluminate to meet assignment deadlines. Elluminate has a number of collaborative tools but the most popular for this project was understandably the two-way audio chat. Eighty-two percent of the students reported using the audio chat in their typical session. Students had an opportunity to network beyond their class.

## III.   LESSONS LEARNED

In future collaborations, it may be important for students to view the assignments from the same level of professional development or better understand the responsibilities of mentoring. When it came to overall goals for the project, in-service teachers reported having different interests than the pre-service students. It could be that they did not understand the mentoring aspect of the project. Assignments should have the same value to all participants. The assignment was worth 20% of the grade for the course for the UIS students and less for the CSU students. This could have affected the quality of engagement as much as the difference in professional development.

Though training had been provided, not all participants took advantage of the available training. Therefore, UIS students reported frustration when the audio technology failed to work properly or easily. Students also reported using the shared application feature but wished to have a better understanding of how this feature worked.

The instructors reported several benefits from this collaboration. They report having had an opportunity to meet new students, share ideas about how a project could be directed, and work through issues in a cooperative manner. It was reassuring to know both instructors would be available to answer questions and direct learning. Comparing this project to the same project given without collaboration with CSU underscores the advantages of a partnership. The instructor for EDL547, who had previously used this assignment in non-collaborative classes, welcomed the ideas and changes which resulted from consultation with the CSU professor. It seemed the sharing of a project brought valuable insight and allowed the instructor to have fresh eyes regarding the structure of assignments and learning outcomes. Instructional collaboration proved to be a good method of reviewing the project and incorporating improvements in the assignment which was thought to be well-established.

## IV.   A SECOND COLLABORATION

A second type of collaboration was carried out in the semester-long online merger of CSU's Web and Society class with UIS's Internet in American Life class. These two classes shared a Blackboard course site and an Elluminate online class conference. Syllabi in the two classes were merged by the participating faculty members. Students enrolled in the class at their home institution. All class sessions, however, were held in fully-shared online classrooms. After their initial self-introductions, the students pursued the course without distinction as to their home institution. All course readings were held in common locations. Mandatory weekly class participation and interaction in the discussion board were conducted without reference or respect to home institution. An online synchronous session among the students and faculty in the merged classes was also joined by another class from yet a third geographically distant institution, Columbia University Teacher's College class in Computer Mediated Communication. Once again, the interactions were seamless without distinction as to the home institution.

The success of this second type of collaboration was evident through the engagement and interactions among students from the two institutions in the Blackboard discussion forums and among students from the three institutions in the synchronous Elluminate session. Perspectives from urban minority students and rural non-minority students were shared freely. Students interacted weekly as they discussed case studies and research questions on the scope and impact of the advent of the Internet in American society.

# V.   CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

A wide range of potential collaboration levels and types exist on a continuum from a single shared synchronous session to fully team taught online sections with students intermingling in all assignments and discussions. While it is impossible to anticipate all possible modes and levels of collaborations, among the likely arrangements are:

- Single or few shared synchronous sessions between classes that meet online or on distant campuses
- Single or few shared asynchronous (discussion board) sessions between classes that meet online or on distant campuses
- Semester-long synchronous class meetings among students enrolled at geographically distant institutions
- Semester-long asynchronous class meetings among students enrolled at geographically distant institutions
- Mixed mode (synchronous and asynchronous) variations of the above

As early as possible in the collaboration process, collaborators must determine how students enroll in the course, how students will receive support services such as technical support, academic help (writing or tutorial services) and library services. As classes begin, instructors should establish correct email addresses for all members, use an online calendar to alert all users to deadlines, make sure students in both institutions have access to appropriate software and hardware, and open up scheduling of synchronous tools so that students can easily make contact. Assignments should have the same weight in each course. Each instructor must be aware of the documents being submitted and remain in continuing contact with all students from both institutions.

It is essential that the faculty members reach a level of shared understanding of goals and objectives for their collaborations. Jean MacGregor, Director of the National Learning Communities Project, writes:

> Carrying off a learning community program—or for that matter, any significant innovation in higher education—means that teams of individuals sail common crafts. For a sustained period of time—a quarter or a semester or even a year—teaching teams commit themselves to a course or program with a common group of students. Sailing together requires teamwork, collaborative skills and collective responsibility that are less familiar to those of us in the habit of sailing solo. Yet this kind of teaching can lead to the deep conversations we need to have about teaching and learning, and about our students, and it can plant vital seeds for institutional development and change. [6]

As we continue to explore inter-institutional class collaborations, certain issues need to be addressed. These issues include faculty responsibilities, institutional liability, cross-institutional enrollment, and software licensing.

History tells us administrative declarations without faculty involvement will fail. In a study of Maine's implementation of Inter-intuitional Interactive Television classrooms, Jun Wang reports institutions and faculty must agree upon academic standards and implement important checks and balances to see that standard s of academic quality issues remain at the forefront of all cooperative projects and classes [7]. It is clear as we move forward that faculty members must continue to have full autonomy in decisions affecting collaborations.

In conclusion, to help collaborative efforts, the authors of this study have set up a webliography site for

Interinstitutional Collaborations and invite readers to use it and to assist in building it by adding resources to: http://online.uis.edu/collaboration/webliography/.

# VI.   REFERENCES

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# VII.  ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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