

Innovative Models for Effective Collaboration between Universities and Community Colleges

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Abstract

Establishing productive relationships between universities and community colleges has been a major goal for many academic institutions, particularly those in major metropolitan areas. However, due to the different academic culture in the two types of institutions, such collaboration has been difficult to achieve. This paper will outline some of the innovative and collaborative efforts entered into by the University of Nebraska at Omaha (UNO) and Metropolitan Community College (MCC). The intent is to illustrate the power of collaboration to create innovative models for initiating and strengthening collaborative activities between universities and community colleges and to provide insights regarding outcomes and benefits based on the successes and challenges of the Omaha experience.

Introduction

UNO and MCC are the largest institutions of higher education in the greater Omaha metropolitan area, a community of ~750,000 and the largest in a 100+ mile radius. UNO serves about 12,300 FTE undergraduate students and MCC about 7,500 FTE students per year and both institutions have undergone rapid growth in recent years. Both schools have a diverse student body; the minority presence is about 22% at MCC and 14% at UNO. The majority of the students from both institutions live and work off campus and are responsible for their own financial support.

Effective collaboration between universities and community colleges has always been an important yet challenging issue for institutes of higher education. Such collaborations have become particularly essential in recent years due to the significant change in the demographics of post secondary students. Recent years have witnessed a change in the nature and career objectives of post secondary students that has led to higher numbers of non-traditional students and first generation college students. As a result, more students prefer to use community colleges as transitional institutes between high schools and four-year colleges. Hence, close relationships and strong partnerships between universities and community colleges are critical to the success and to the missions of both types of institutes.

In taking on new ideas for collaboration between two different types of academic institutions, a number of factors need to be taken account. The first major factor is that universities and community colleges have different missions and they deal with very different issues related to student objectives, budget restrictions and educational goals,

resulting in two different cultures. A superficial collaborative plan is likely to face a cultural clash and would have a little chance to succeed. On the other hand, a well-planned activity, designed jointly by members of both institutes, that takes into consideration the academic parameters on each institute has a much higher chance to succeed.

Based on the experiences obtained by taking on many collaborative activities with different levels degrees of success, UNO and MCC both in Omaha, Nebraska have reached a point in their collaborative relationship at which partnerships are developed with a high degree of planning that result in activities with a high probability of success. These activities reached a high point last summer when a jointly submitted NSF STEP proposal was approved for funding. With funding of \$2M over five years, the grant was developed to encourage and support students in the Science/Technology/Engineering/Mathematics (STEM) areas, hence, developing a STEM Talent Expansion Program (STEP).

The Initial NSF STEP Successes

The grant proposal, entitled “UNO and MCC STEPping Together”, was one of twelve national awards identified this year. The general purpose of the NSF STEP program is to increase the number of undergraduate degrees granted, both bachelors and associate, in all of the STEM areas. A natural way to attempt to do this is to reach out to all under-represented and non-traditional potential student groups. Thus it is especially appropriate for urban educational institutions to work together to do this, and even more appropriate for a university to work together with a community college to achieve this goal and many other endeavors. Although the award went into effect May 2004, several initiatives have been already been successfully implemented. New avenues for communication and sharing opened up numerous additional opportunities for growth and success. It was important, however, that growth of both institutions occur in the same direction. To ensure this end, several “bridges” between the UNO and MCC were built and strengthened including the following:

- Historically, many course articulations were in place between the two institutions. This allowed students to transfer their coursework from MCC to UNO with little trouble or complication. However, until the advent of the STEP grant, MCC had only courses available in the areas of math and science and did not have certificate or degree options in these STEM areas. The courses transferred to UNO but there was no clear pipeline or bridge that showed a clear connection or pathway between the two schools. Within the first 6 months of obtaining the grant, faculty from both institutions created 7 new degree options (Pre-Bioinformatics, Pre-Biology, Pre-Biotechnology, Pre-Chemistry, Computer Science, Pre-Chemistry, Pre-Mathematics, and Pre-Physics.) available at the community college level that transfer directly into the university offering students junior status and keeping them on track to obtain their baccalaureate degree. The degrees flowed from the need to provide students with clearly identified steps and direction from one institution to the other.

- Grant funds have enabled MCC to hire a full time STEP Outreach Liaison to coordinate the recruitment of students into either MCC's new associate degree programs or directly into UNO STEM programs. This individual actually promotes both the community college and four-year university experiences to prospective students and highlights the partnership and transferability of coursework between the two institutions. In addition, the Outreach Liaison will also be able to advise MCC students about further educational opportunities at UNO. It was a win/win for both students and the schools and a bridge that will be well traveled to the benefit of all.
- Bridge scholarships were also created encouraging completion at the community college level and continuation at the university level. Students working for an associate degree at MCC can apply for tuition remission during their last 30 quarter hours of MCC course work. Upon completing one of the new MCC associate degrees they will then be eligible for substantial tuition reimbursement at UNO while continuing work toward a STEM bachelor's degree.

Other Models and Examples of Successful Collaboration

Institutions and the communities they serve benefit from collaborative ventures. In the face of increasing budgetary and funding restrictions and challenges, partnerships offer options to stretch and combine resources to accomplish projects or objectives that are no longer possible if done separately. It is critical to establish strong lines of communication between institutions coupled with creative and innovative teams comprised of stakeholders at both institutions to brainstorm and create opportunities which build on each institution's mission, strength and needs. UNO and MCC have had isolated collaborative successes between various areas of the institutions but the current need to increase enrollments while curtailing spending has taken the need for collaboration to greater heights and is exhibiting greater success than imagined.

Sharing Funding of Graduate Teaching Assistantships (GTA's)

Cuts in state funding impacted the number of Graduate Teaching Assistantships available in some academic areas at UNO, especially in the Mathematics Department. At the same time, MCC was in need of adjunct instructors to teach many of their developmental and entry level math courses. A perfect solution for both institutions was created when MCC offered teaching positions to qualified UNO GTA candidates.

UNO sent prospective GTA candidates to MCC where they were interviewed for adjunct positions in the math department. GTA's went through the standard adjunct faculty interview and credentialing process and if selected, were provided with a teaching assignment at the community college for the following academic year. The salary earned by the GTA was paid to the university to underwrite the GTA stipend and required the university to acquire funds for only the tuition remission portion of the assistantship which was a substantial savings. It enabled UNO to offer more GTA opportunities to their students and expanded the adjunct pool for MCC.

While in the second year of a successful partnership between the Math Departments at both institutions, this opportunity is being explored in other academic areas as well.

Aside from the obvious benefits to both institutions by addressing funding issues at UNO and staffing needs at MCC, there are additional positive outcomes for the students involved. The GTA's obtain teaching experience in a community college setting, exposing them to a greater diversity of students and teaching challenges than they may have had while teaching in the four-year institution. This is especially true for those students teaching in MCC's math department where GTA's were staffed primarily in developmental math courses which are not taught or available at UNO. In addition, this provided an opportunity for peer mentoring to occur; MCC students learning from a student who is successfully pursuing their educational goals and can provide a personal and first-hand perspective regarding the importance of continuing education and perspectives concerning one of the four-year universities in the community. This is truly a "win-win" for all involved.

Complementing versus Competing Course Scheduling

One of the next joint ventures being discussed between the university and community college is exploring ways to enhance scheduling of courses offered at both institutions. Increased budget constraints have necessitated some cut backs at UNO, requiring select departments to reduce the number of adjunct faculty and therefore the number of sections that can be offered each semester. The largest reduction of offerings has been in the lower level courses, many of which are already articulated and offered at MCC. Through careful and strategic planning, it will be possible to identify courses and/or sections that UNO is unable to realistically offer on a regular basis and to increase the number of these course sections offered at MCC. The increased sections at the community college will not only address student need for these courses in the community but they will also ensure that students can continue to complete the lower level coursework and transfer these for subsequent enrollment in the upper level courses at the university, thus maintaining or even increasing the number of upper level courses available at UNO. The rationale behind this effort is to acknowledge the challenges and limitations that face both institutions and look for opportunities to complement each other rather than compete against each other.

Effective Communication Leads to Opportunities and more Grants

The successful planning and acquisition of the NSF grant has generated a renewed commitment to collaborative efforts between UNO and MCC. As a result of regular meetings between a small core group of stakeholders at both institutions who worked to secure the NSF grant, a larger circle of inclusion comprised of faculty, administration and staff was created which has led to the creation of more team building and opportunities. The relationship between these two institutions has historically been cordial with positive or regular exchanges between the two being somewhat sporadic or limited to specific programs or personnel. Changing times, however, has required that the relationship be redefined and renegotiated to benefit all. Perceptions between faculty at both institutions regarding respective academic rigor and course articulation and transfer are being discussed openly and directly in a positive manner to dispel and replace previous misunderstandings and faulty perceptions with the goal of gaining understanding and

insight of each other's current situations. A history of misconceptions between UNO and MCC is being broken down to create a new platform for productive and effective planning. One of the most positive outcomes so far in this collaborative process is the willingness of all parties to address issues and challenges from a more pragmatic perspective with a greater and renewed focus on student success and student learning.

Two unforeseen but welcomed consequences of this renewed team/communication building and focus on student success and learning were additional grant opportunities for both UNO and MCC. After hearing of the NSF success, a UNO instructor from the English department spearheaded a joint grant application and project to begin an assessment exchange project between the two institutions. Both parties have agreed to continue pursuit of this project even if funding is not provided. The assessment exchange and electronic portfolio project will enhance communication between the participating academic departments and faculty as well as ensure smoother transitions for students transferring from one institution to the other. Creating and maintaining a collaborative model for assessment of student learning and outcomes will benefit both institutions and help to generate new lines of communication and involvement between the institutes.

An additional grant opportunity arose as a result of other conversations between team members and information that was shared in passing. However, when MCC was invited by a community partner to participate in a biotechnology grant it was suggested that UNO be included since knowledge had been shared through team meetings that this was a direction the university was interested in pursuing. Both schools have begun to utilize information obtained during formal and informal conversations to expand the possibilities of collaboration throughout the institutions. A true team spirit is emerging with a focus on "we" versus "me". This not only creates additional opportunities for academic partnerships and student learning but can and will yield financial benefits with each successful application for future awards.

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