Chapter 8
Great Plains Interactive Distance Education Alliance (Great Plains IDEA)

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This chapter will examine the organizational and technological challenges encountered by the highly successful Great Plains Interactive Distance Education Alliance (Great Plains IDEA) since its members began offering multi-university online academic programs in 2000. Members include the following universities: Colorado State, Iowa State, Kansas State, Texas Tech, Michigan State, Missouri, Montana State, Nebraska, North Dakota State, Oklahoma State, and South Dakota State. Inter-institutional online academic programs are a cost-effective means of rapidly increasing access and addressing emerging educational needs. The chapter explains how the Great Plains IDEA began, operates and has evolved, as well as the mistakes made, lessons learned, and upcoming challenges. A major technological challenge was identifying a secure multi-institution enrollment system for sharing student data between enrolling and teaching institutions the award-winning ExpanSIS system. The authors hope that higher education leaders will be convinced that inter-institutional collaboration is a viable solution to many higher education challenges.

BACKGROUND

The Great Plains Interactive Distance Education Alliance (Great Plains IDEA) is a joint project of its member institutions -- 11 public universities in 11 states. The Great Plains IDEA is an academic alliance. In other words, its primary purpose is to provide access to educational opportunities by collaboratively developing and delivering high-quality, online academic programs. A secondary purpose is

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Great Plains Interactive Distance Education Alliance (Great Plains IDEA) to provide a structure for member institutions to be more innovative and competitive in today’s higher education marketplace by efficiently and effectively utilizing limited resources.

In 2008, the Great Plains IDEA expanded its scope beyond the Human Sciences with the affiliation of the Agriculture Interactive Distance Education Alliance (AG*IDEA). This expansion was initially driven by the interests of the agriculture deans at Iowa State University, Kansas State University, the University of Missouri and the University of Nebraska who were intrigued by the success of their human sciences counterparts and wanted to capitalize on the infrastructure that had been created to support the Great Plains IDEA programs.

The mission of the Great Plains IDEA is to enable member institutions to jointly offer educational programs with other institutions and thereby give students and professionals more access to high quality education.

Culture

“From its initiation, the Great Plains IDEA has organized itself into a culture where administrative leadership is shared, where policies are designed to facilitate academic innovation, where faculty participants provide academic leadership, and where both alliance and institutional interests govern decisions” (Great Plains IDEA Policy & Procedure Manual, Page 9). The notion of shared governance pervades this alliance. Wheeler (1999) states that the key to successful inter-institutional relationships is dedicated champions at all collaborating institutions. Wheeler also notes that since faculty members have control of content and conduct of courses, change must be championed by faculty members; however, a shared vision by top level administrators is required for institutionalization of technology-mediated inter-institutional programming.

Collaborative programs can be a cost-effective approach to new online program development; however, higher education institutions are more familiar with competing than collaborating. Implementing an inter-institutional academic program requires a new mindset, as well as new methods of operation. In order to create a successful alliance, key individuals across each partnering campus need to be on board and trust each other (Moxley, 2003). The management of trust and power is essential to building alliances. Trust and power are personal and institutional issues. The first step in building trust is to select with care the partners with whom you will work—if the people are not trustworthy, the practices will not be trusted. The most practical way to manage power is to select peers as partners. In this alliance, agreement on principles precedes agreement on policies. The Great Plains IDEA established three basic principles to guide the development of policies and procedures (Great Plains IDEA Policy & Procedures Manual, Page 10):

- **Behave as Equals**
  - Graduate schools cross-list Alliance courses.
  - Alliance courses are transcripted as institutional courses, not as transfer courses.
  - Graduate faculty status is honored by all Alliance institutions.

- **Respect Institutional Differences**
  - Alliance programs accommodate institutional differences—faculty workload, administrative and financial arrangements, and institutional culture.
  - The curriculum is the same everywhere, but course numbers and program and degree titles are unique to each institution.

- **Simplify Student Navigation**
  - Differences in procedure from one institution to another are transparent to the learners.
  - The cost to enroll in an Alliance course is the same everywhere.
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