



Collaborating to Learn, Learning to Collaborate

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College and university professors need ongoing opportunities for professional development in an era of rapid and continuous change. However, higher education institutions have limited resources to invest in their faculty as programs to work with diverse student populations, technology, and new initiatives compete for limited discretionary funds. In this context, collaboration is a powerful vehicle to promote faculty learning and professional development and an effective way to maximize the impact of institutional investments in faculty.

Collaborative faculty development can help to maintain a dynamic institutional climate that sustains good faculty and ultimately promotes a healthy learning environment for students. Collaboration also requires individuals and institutions to step out of the comfort zones where they usually operate quite autonomously. To achieve the benefits that collaboration promises, the parties involved must learn how to work productively in tandem with others.

This article examines collaborative activities supported by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation through its Faculty Career Enhancement (FCE) grant program. The grant program, which funded activities at twenty-three liberal arts colleges, led to the development of a variety of strategies to support faculty across the academic life cycle. Here we focus specifically on collaborative initiatives that emerged from the program and discuss their objectives, outcomes, and benefits. This research is drawn from examples at liberal arts colleges, but many of the faculty development model lessons learned here are very relevant to the efforts of other kinds of colleges. The article also shares lessons learned that can help other faculty

groups and institutions to form collaborations that are productive, long-lasting, and successful.

During the 2006–7 academic year, we studied the implementation and impact of the Mellon Faculty Career Enhancement program in three ways. With the permission and cooperation of the institutions and the foundation, we reviewed proposals and annual reports submitted by the twenty-three institutions to the foundation. We surveyed chief academic officers of all twenty-three colleges concerning their institution's involvement with the FCE program. Finally, we interviewed program participants, program leaders, and chief academic officers at eleven of the twenty-three participating colleges. We gathered information on the specific activities of FCE participants, project outcomes, and insights gained from implementing the FCE program within and across institutions. We made a special effort to understand the collaborative activities the FCE program facilitated. We used qualitative analysis methods to identify key themes, patterns, and insights that would be useful to other institutions and individuals interested in collaborative approaches to faculty development.

What Do We Already Know About Collaboration?

Several key questions helped to build a foundation for our examination of collaborative faculty development. Why do individuals and organizations spend their time and resources collaborating? What incentives motivate collaborators to embark on such a commitment? What challenges are encountered along the way? And what advice can we take from experienced collaborators? We explore



these questions through a brief analysis of the literature on collaboration in order to frame our real-world examples in the context of prior research.

Motivation and Perceived Benefits

One of the principal benefits of collaborating with others is to achieve goals that cannot be achieved alone. In fact, one definition of collaboration characterizes the process as “an effective interpersonal process that facilitates the achievement of goals that cannot be reached when individual professionals act on their own” (Bronstein 2003, 299). In many ways, this is the all-encompassing reason why individuals and institutions enter collaborative relationships. However, beneath this overarching benefit, we find that the motivation for collaborating can be broken down into three more specific reasons: increasing prestige or influence, sharing resources and reducing costs, and facilitating learning. Each of these motivators is a pillar supporting the overall incentive for collaboration: the desire for greater achievement through working with others.

From a competitive standpoint, collaborators work together because of the need to enhance an individual’s or an institution’s position in terms of prestige or clout (Chen 2004). Collaborative ties can unite independent actors as allies against common rivals or to fight for a common cause.

Another motivator is the need to access resources and reduce costs (Ebers 1997; Farmakopoulou 2002). Budgets are tight, especially in higher education, and there is a growing need to create ways to

maximize the use of limited resources while maintaining high performance.

Finally, “learning” is a major incentive for collaborating. Individuals and organizations are seeking to learn about the newest or “best” practices to apply to their own situations. Increasing knowledge is best achieved by connecting with others and sharing information rather than expending time, energy, or other resources extracting or researching the desired information (Ebers 1997). The outcome is new learning or insights to better adapt and more effectively respond (Kelly, Schaan, and Joncas 2002) to a rapidly changing environment.

Collaboration Challenges

Whenever people or organizations come together, conflict is bound to surface. The most common challenges of collaborating revolve around cultural differences, finding common interests and goals, time, geographic constraints, and power differences present in the group.

Cultural differences are present across individual, disciplinary, and institutional boundaries. And the more that cultures differ, the more likely that barriers to communication, and ultimately collaboration, will develop (Kelly, Schaan, and Joncas, 2002). Similarly, finding *common interests* or successfully negotiating *common goals* can also prove to be challenging.

Time is a valuable resource that is often required to develop collaborative proposals, maintain communication, resolve conflicts, and complete shared projects or tasks. Similarly, the challenge of arranging face-to-face meetings because of *geographic distance*

can make ongoing communication among collaborators difficult. Projects may be carried out at different locations and finding the time to communicate and keep a long-distance collaboration moving forward can be a burden.

Finally, the balance of *power* between partners is also a factor that can influence any working relationship (McCloughen and O’Brien 2006). If one party has more power to make decisions or is superior to another member in some relevant capacity, there are possible negative ramifications for the entire relationship.

What Makes Collaborations Successful?

We have found four key elements common to successful collaborations: trust, communication, a sense of shared interests and goals, and defined and clear expectations and roles.

Trust is an unspoken but essential component of a successful collaboration (Koza and Lewin 1998; Kelly, Schaan and Joncas 2002). If an individual perceives his or her partner(s) as being overly opportunistic and/or acting as a rival, the individual may be reluctant to participate fully in the collaboration for fear of being exploited. This is true for collaborating institutions as well. Trust between partners must exist in order for the collaboration to flourish. Fortunately, a high level of pre-existing trust often exists between partners who have previously worked together, and many collaborations emerge from prior collaborations (Cohen and Levinthal 1990).

Moreover, the quality and frequency of *communication* is key to improving and maintaining trust between individuals or institutions (Mohr and Spekman 1994). In



fact, researchers suggest that communication is “central to the creation of the alignment of partner’s expectations, goals and objective” (Kelly, Schaan, and Joncas 2002, 15). A sense of *shared or common circumstances, interests, and goals* is crucial for maintaining collaborations. Collaboration leaders must ensure there is a “shared responsibility in the entire process of reaching goals” (Bronstein 2003, 301). This is achieved by having (1) a shared vision, (2) clearly defined goals, (3) an agreed-upon mission and strategy, (4) all parties engaged in the decision-making process, and (5) the ability to compromise (Bronstein 2003). Clear rules and expectations reduce the chance for conflict and help to move joint projects ahead.

Finally, having *defined rules, procedures, and expectations* of members in the relationship help to define formally the boundaries of what each partner is or is not supposed to do (Doz 1996). These also help clarify what each partner is expected to contribute to the relationship.

Collaborative Faculty Development Strategies

The Mellon Foundation and the twenty-three institutions that received FCE grants recognized the inherent benefits of collaboration. For this reason, the colleges participating in the FCE program developed a variety of interpersonal and inter-institutional collaboration opportunities for faculty. These included:

1. **Comentoring.** Comentoring projects, like those at Macalester and Carleton colleges, provided support for junior and seasoned faculty members to work together on teaching, research, or

service projects of mutual interest.

These alliances were based on the belief that well-designed mentoring partnerships can provide beneficial learning opportunities to both parties, not just the junior member.

2. **Scholarly consultation grants.** These grants provided modest funds to enable professors to travel to consult with a colleague elsewhere who shares a common research interest or to bring that colleague to the grant recipient’s home campus. Wesleyan University’s mini-grant program for scholarly consultation is one example of this technique. In a time when collaborative work is increasingly important within and between many fields, small travel grants can help professors to keep up with rapid advances in knowledge and, in some cases, to initiate or maintain important professional partnerships.
3. **Support for collaborative research.** Several FCE institutions developed strategies to promote faculty research collaborations either within or across institutions. For example, a number of the FCE colleges supported the research projects of partners who work at different FCE colleges but share common scholarly interests. Reed College funded semester-long leaves for its faculty members to collaborate with colleagues in research universities or other types of institutions. This type of support for cross-institution collaboration is especially beneficial for faculty who may be the only person at their institution who specializes in a certain field. In addition,

some FCE programs intentionally encouraged cross-generational and cross-disciplinary collaborative research.

4. **Research/student assistants.** Beneficial collaborations are not always between faculty peers. Some FCE funds permitted professors to hire advanced students to assist with their research or other professional projects. Professors at Oberlin, Amherst, and several other FCE colleagues benefited from such opportunities for faculty-student collaborations. This small grant program provided a win-win opportunity for faculty and students. Students could benefit from a professional apprenticeship and their faculty “collaborators” were able to initiate or advance important and invigorating professional projects.
5. **Field/interest-based conferences and workshops.** Faculty from FCE colleges also came together to design conferences and workshops focusing on shared subject specializations or common interdisciplinary or pedagogical interests. One example was a workshop on empirical methods and the liberal arts curriculum planned by professors at Smith and Reed Colleges. These collaboratively planned meetings brought together faculty from many institutions to share information, enhance research skills, and, in many cases, trade creative instructional strategies.
6. **Support for intellectual community.** Many FCE colleges used a portion of their grant to create space and time on their campuses for intellectual community. Recognizing that the personal and



professional demands on faculty today leave little room for community and intellectual discourse, faculty on several FCE campuses formed reading or discussion groups around broad-based themes. One example is the TriCo Colleges [Bryn Mawr, Haverford, Swarthmore] “Food Group,” which drew faculty from the natural sciences, social sciences, and humanities to discuss issues related to food. “Floating seminars,” another example of community building, were sponsored jointly by eight of the FCE colleges. These seminars brought together small groups of faculty members who traveled from campus to campus among the eight schools to discuss topics of multidisciplinary interest.

7. Leadership development. Leadership development and succession is a concern on most college and university campuses. To enhance leadership capacity, a number of FCE colleges, including Barnard and Wellesley, pooled their resources and planned joint department chair workshops or retreats. Other colleges, such as Grinnell and Oberlin, brought their own department chairs together to learn with and from each other about effective ways to lead their academic units. The department chair role has similarities across many institutions, disciplines, and departments. By organizing collaborative leadership development, the participants could exchange information and creative ideas to enhance their job performance while better utilizing limited professional development resources.

Outcomes: Tangible and Intangible

The collaborative activities we describe above led to a variety of outcomes, both tangible and intangible. Faculty members and their institutions benefited in significant ways. *Tangible outcomes* included publications, new and revised courses, and curriculum enhancements. For example, an interinstitutional writer’s workshop produced books published by several major university presses. One participant observed that “my book wouldn’t have been half the book had it not been [for this collaborative workshop].” Interinstitutional FCE conferences and workshops helped some faculty participants to design new courses or add major new components to continuing courses. As a result, their institution’s curriculum and student learning opportunities were enhanced. New professional networks and sometimes additional collaborations were further outcomes of the varied collaborative activities the FCE grant program stimulated.

The opportunity to meet and work with people across disciplines and at other institutions helped participants to build relationships and professional networks that often continue beyond the life of the foundation grant. Some of these networks have led to more benefits than originally anticipated. A prime example is a network of senior women scientists that has been continued and expanded by a half-million dollar grant from a federal government agency. The interinstitutional leadership development programs have also yielded positive results. We learned that department chair training has helped to broaden the perspective of chairs by helping them to understand the current challenges confronting higher education and their type of institution

in particular. This enlarged perspective helped chairs to focus on the welfare of their institution as well as their own department.

The *intangible benefits* of collaborative faculty activities and programs are less visible and certainly more difficult to measure. However, they can be equally important to individual professors and their institutions. At numerous colleges we heard that enhanced community and collegiality were outcomes of the joint faculty programs the FCE grant program helped to initiate. For instance, one participant described faculty reading groups as “some of the only occasions that are just for faculty members from different disciplines to meet, exchange ideas, and learn together.” We heard how collaboration opportunities encouraged cross-boundary idea sharing by providing time and space for faculty from widely divergent disciplines or distinctly different institutions to come together around a shared interest or situation. Collaborations can stimulate new initiatives and innovation by exposing faculty to new perspectives and introducing them to a new disciplinary or institutional culture. As we learned from this study, various forms of faculty collaboration can pull away blinders we do not even know we are wearing when we have few opportunities to interact or work closely with colleagues from different environments.

Most important, we learned of renewed and reenergized faculty as we studied the impact of FCE-supported activities on many campuses. The learning, increased productivity, and enhanced collegial relationships that resulted from the varied collaborations we examined contributed substantially to these intangible, but very beneficial, outcomes.

Lessons Learned

Collaborations to promote professors' learning and professional development can produce lasting benefits for individual faculty members and their institutions. However, as research on collaboration indicates, collaborating can be costly, time consuming, and frustrating for all involved if not properly designed and managed. We conclude with several lessons learned from our study of collaborative faculty development activities:

1. **Choose partners carefully.** This advice holds for individuals and institutions who wish to collaborate. The chances for a successful collaboration increase when potential partners get to know each other, possess common interests, and identify similar purposes and goals. Entering into a collaboration casually without thinking through the nature of the partnership, the division of labor, and developing shared goals has the potential to leave one or more participants in the alliance disappointed or even angry.
2. **Never underestimate the importance of socialization.**

Collaborations are quintessentially social enterprises. Hence, conditions that promote conversation are important. Many of the participants in our study observed how the presence of refreshments and opportunities to socialize facilitated collaboration. Although refreshments are often the first thing to go when budgets are tight, we were cautioned not to minimize their importance. "Brilliant ideas emerge over food," one person noted.

And nothing is more beneficial to successful collaboration than brilliant ideas that emerge through dialogue.

3. **Monitor progress and assess outcomes.** Collaborations are dynamic entities. Few evolve exactly as originally planned. For this reason, collaborators should periodically take stock of how things are going, identify challenges, and work to resolve conflicts. Failure to monitor the collaborative process allows problems to fester and potentially prevent a collaboration from achieving its original objectives.
4. **Be flexible.** Many of the collaborative arrangements we studied lived up to their promise, but a few did not. When a collaboration does not work as planned, partners should be flexible. Either they can rethink the structure and process of their partnership to make it work more effectively or they can invest their resources in something that will be more productive. The lesson several collaborators learned was, "Don't stick with the original plan if it isn't working." Try something different.

Conclusion

The twenty-three colleges that participated in the Mellon Foundation's Faculty Career Enhancement Program developed a variety of creative strategies to support faculty development through collaboration. They used collaboration (both interinstitutional and interindividual) as a powerful tool to promote learning and professional growth. In the process, the colleges learned valuable lessons on how to collaborate effectively. The insights they gained can help other colleges

and universities that wish to support faculty at all stages of academic life.

Working closely with colleagues to address shared concerns and to grow together is the hallmark of a vital academic community. Creating conditions that encourage faculty collaboration is an important way for higher education institutions to innovate and adapt in a time of rapid and continuous change. ■

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