

EFFECTIVE COLLABORATION: A KEY FACTOR IN ECONOMIC SUSTAINABILITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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HIGHER EDUCATION IN CRISES

The Covid-19 pandemic has powerfully illustrated the extraordinary connectedness of the world in ways and at levels previously considered unimaginable. Notable elements powering this connectedness have been the emergence of the internet and the range of options afforded because of this remarkable, essentially free, global communications system. Beyond that, the drop in the comparative cost per mile of international travel has radically changed the dynamics of business, missions, and trade. To be able to use a credit card at an ATM to download local currency, whether it is Hong Kong or Cape Town, is a graphic example of both extraordinary technical, policy, and economic changes unthinkable even fifty years ago.

Alongside these startling developments there has been the back side of innovation. On the dark side, security has taken on implications that call for completely new forms of diligence. And, with new opportunity, demands for collaboration have escalated. In the scientific, medical, financial, or technical development worlds, collaboration is now the normal. The expected *de riguer* is expressed in virtually every sector. Even principal funding sources of scientific research now routinely ask “What other organizations will be working with you on this project.”

A modest browsing of current research, articles, blogs, etc. regarding the state of higher education globally makes it clear that "The Academy" faces unprecedented challenges. Decline in public and private funding, competition between traditional on-campus, electronic/on-line, and hybrid delivery models, competition for and retention of quality faculty, declining belief in the viability of traditional student tuition models, and student retention and completion rates. These and many other issues confront the

leadership of any higher ed institution. There is growing research and questions about perceived relevance of educational models to real life and the workplace. It is increasingly apparent that growing complexity of physical, social, economic and spiritual issues can rarely be addressed effectively in isolation.

This rise of communications and collaborative technologies makes the isolated higher ed institution or even departments within those institutions appear increasingly dated.

Voices from government, business, community, funders, and, in the world of Christian higher ed, the church and her agencies are calling for greater accountability transparency, collaboration and integration of effort.

What are the marks of a truly collaborative institution? Is there a Biblical rationale? What are key elements in building a durable culture of collaboration -- on campus and with vital external constituencies? What are key principles of collaboration that are particularly relevant to higher ed?

This brief paper seeks to address some of the fundamentals relevant to these issues. is, at best, introductory. Your comments, feedback, and suggestions are encouraged.

A STRATEGIC FUNDER'S PERSPECTIVE

Some time ago I talked at length with a long time friend who headed one of the U.S. best-known Christian foundations. He had a doctorate in Educational Administration and, while the foundation supports a variety of ministry initiatives, Christian higher education has always been a priority for the foundation. He said, "You may not know it, but every year I and our foundation Trustees have been making an average of 5-10 on-site, campus visits to Christian colleges and seminaries. We want to make our own assessment of the spirit, vision, and effectiveness of the schools -- their leaders, their programs, and their outcomes. We have settled on certain key indicators we look for when we do these campus visits. And, while we have developed a number of conclusions that now guide our investment policy, *I have to say that, above all else, we have concluded that the future belongs to those Christian schools have a vision for and really practice collaboration throughout what they do.*"

He went on, "Those schools typically have a clear vision of who they are, their strengths -- what they can and cannot do well; their sense of identity is strong; they have an outward vision rather than inward; their leadership is focused on the future rather than the past. They are open to change -- not threatened by it; they are marked by a spirit of optimism. Their programs are well integrated -- have a clear focus built around their vision, purpose, and identity; *and their programs are perceived as relevant by faculty, students, their communities, and their financial supporters.*"

As I listened to this man, I asked myself, "If I was a Christian college or institution President, I wonder how my school would measure up on such a score card?"

Effective collaboration can produce powerful benefits on the campus, in the school's relationship with the community, the school's relationship with other institutions, and the school's relationship with key constituencies off campus. And effectiveness in these relationships can spell the key difference between financial success and stability or declining strength and ability to meet the school's vision.

COLLABORATION IS ROOTED IN SCRIPTURE

The good news is that God's people working together is not something borrowed from business or other 'secular' sources. In Genesis, the book of Job, Daniel, Ephesians, and many other places we learn that God dwells in harmony, in community outside of time. So, it is not surprising that at creation He said, "Let us make man in our image." In Genesis 2-3 relationships were destroyed -- with God, with my own personhood, with each other, with the created order, and with eternity.

Jesus came to restore those relationships in His great, finished work on the cross. Not theoretical or ecumenical unity but real, practical love for each other demonstrated before the world in a readiness to work together. In the Garden, the story recounted for us in John 17, Jesus could have prayed for anything: that His people would be holy, that they would be diligent in their witness, that they would be generous -- even sacrificial. But He didn't. He prayed for one thing; that His followers would be one *so that* the world would believe that He had come from the Father. Jesus Himself made this striking link between His people working together in tangible, visible unity and whether the world would believe! What remarkable motivation! It is certainly true that effective collaboration can have a profound effect on the life, vitality, and sustainability of our institution. But it is good to know that working together is *His idea* and that there are lasting, eternal consequences -- wider, significant benefits to be reaped for Kingdom advance. Passages like Psalm 133 make it clear that as God's people work together there are huge blessings -- release of the power of the Holy Spirit and refreshment of His people.

And, finally, passages such as John 4:35-38 and I Corinthians 3:3-9 make it clear that God's Kingdom is built as different elements play different parts -- *with each respecting the roles if not working explicitly together.*

The handbook on Kingdom collaboration, *Well Connected – Releasing Power & Restoring Hope Through Kingdom Partnerships*, has three chapters exclusively devoted to the Biblical basis for Kingdom collaboration; the motivation, and benefits associated with God's people working together. ⁽¹⁾

EFFECTIVE COLLABORATION CAN AFFECT THE ENTIRE LIFE OF THE INSTITUTION

Consider these key sectors of your institution's daily life -- and its future.

- Relationship with faculty and staff
- Relationship with Trustees
- Student recruitment, graduation percentages, and placement
- Faculty recruitment and retention
- Operational costs
- Creativity of programs offered
- Ability to make relevant change
- Perceived value by funders and your key constituencies.

THE 200 YEAR DRIFT IN HIGHER EDUCATION -- INTEGRATION TO ISOLATION

150-200 years ago, "The Academy" as it was typically known was a collection of teachers who had distinguished themselves through performance in specific fields and through academic rigor. But one characteristic was almost always present; every faculty member knew where their discipline or special "fit in" -- or, how their specialized field related to others at The Academy. It was a mark of true education and intellectual maturity that faculty not only appreciated how the various specialties related to each other but could engage students and other faculty alike in provocative discussion as to the relevance of their field on that of others. This awareness of the "others" in the faculty created a climate of discourse, discussion, and camaraderie. In the earliest model of the academy professors were (still) active practitioners, really scholar-practitioners, with active feet in the topic areas.

Subsequent "drift" has often distanced Higher Ed from the operational level -- the real world, whatever the discipline. Reconnecting well and actively linking the academy to the field, sets the stage for collaboration with churches, other ministries, and wider society in general.

In previous days it was a holistic view of life, education, and the world that they expected their students to carry away from The Academy. Simply put, the definition of an "educated man" (or woman) was very different from today.

Over the years specialization, professionalization, and departmentalization in The Academy changed dramatically. The typical path for pursuit of higher degrees became more and more individualistic -- a longer, lonelier path. Academic pursuits and daily life slowly move farther and farther apart. ⁽²⁾ While the profile of your institution may be unique, the general trend in higher education has been a drift from integration to isolation. Some vision-driven academic leadership are making strenuous efforts to reorient their educational philosophy and practice toward a more integrated approach. But it is always a challenge and takes specific commitment and intentionality.

This fundamental culture of isolation has a way of affecting everything we do: Faculty, Staff, and Trustee roles in the institution; our view of students and how they participate in the life, program, and policies of the institution; our view of relationships with the community and with specialized constituencies such as funders, churches, alumni and their families.

CHURCH-INSTITUTIONAL COLLABORATION: A CASE STUDY

I recently asked the President of a well-know Institution in Europe what was the greatest single challenge facing his school. You can imagine my surprise when he did not say money, student recruitment, or faculty retention. Instead, he answered, "Effective placement of our graduates." Knowing the institution had grown out of its history with the a denomination and their local church in the region, I asked him, "To what extent are pastors or denominational regularly on the campus -- teaching classes, acting as guest speakers, giving input to your curriculum, interacting with your student and faculty, etc.?" I was even more surprised when he said, "Almost never." Despite his response I went on to ask, "What kind of a regular program do you have to place your students in local church or other ministry opportunities on a part-time or internship basis while they are at your school?" Now, not so surprising, he said, "We really don't have a regular program like that even though we've been talking about it for a number of years."

Briefly, this small case history illustrates isolation regarding several vital issues:

- The school leadership did not demonstrate that they place high value on the experience and contribution that the pastors and denominational leaders could provide -- either in classroom content, shaping institutional vision and values, or shaping the school's policies.
- It communicates that, from the school's perspective, the participation and counsel of the pastors' and denominational leaders was not needed, certainly not essential, and -- in effect -- communicated that their involvement was actually irrelevant to what the school needed -- either day to day or long term.
- And, the school's isolation from one of its primary constituencies showed one primary reason why, when graduates were produced, they were not perceived as vital or highly relevant to church effectiveness and future plans.

Now, even though you may not know the region, what kind of financial support would you imagine the school is getting from the churches in the area? Would you imagine the *churches* consider the *institution* to be highly relevant, almost indispensable, making a real contribution to their local church life -- therefore, deserving of their financial support?

Not surprisingly, when I asked the President about financial support from the churches, sadly, he fell back on the mantra about European churches not being very generous to outside institutions.

On the campus of a well-known North American Christian university I met over lunch with the Dean of the School of Business. For 20 minutes he described a three-year journey of effort with the on-campus department of Theology to jointly develop a Theology of Work curriculum. He described a mixed but intense cluster of issues such as getting colleagues to "cross the street" between the departments; stumbling into a world

of widely differing vocabulary; funding and budget issues; hierarchies and traditional protocols; and mixed motivation and perceived relevance and urgency. As we interacted it became evident it was yet another story of labored effort rather than one of excitement, energy, and perceived high potential added value for the departments, the university itself, the students, their futures, and how the university's programs were perceived "on the outside."

I leave it to you to imagine what might have been different if there was an open, collaborative environment on this campus which energized innovation, trust, quality of educational experience, which led to high perceived value of the overall educational experience. And, possibly even more important, what would it take to provide the academic and financial incentives, administrative climate, personal and professional motivation to produce a context in which such mutually affirming, high-ownership, high-participation collaboration would occur -- and more importantly, be sustained?

These brief stories powerfully demonstrate how money; continuing economic sustainability and the practice of effective collaboration are so closely tied together.

CONSIDER THESE SIX IDEAS AFFECTING YOUR SCHOOL'S CREDIBILITY & FUNDING

- *Perceived value* of your institution's programs are regularly judged by your students, faculty, Trustees, the community, other institutions, and the church and her related ministries.
- Value placed on your institution's program or service is influenced by many things -- among them the perceived quality and relevance of curriculum, your academic standards, spiritual vision, quality of the faculty, etc. But, possibly most vital is how they perceive your institution's *relevance* to real life. Are your programs producing graduates that demonstrate spiritual maturity, understanding, and competence - clearly *relevant* to real life, work, and ministry?
- Perceived relevance of educational programs is directly linked to the extent to which your institution is actively, directly *engaged* with its own core constituencies, the community, and the life of the church.
- Being *engaged* is always marked by intentional *collaboration* -- actively listening to, interacting with, and serving your primary constituencies.
- *Engagement* with and demonstrated value to your primary constituencies is, ultimately, what makes the difference in how your institution is perceived.
- And, *how your institution is perceived directly affects the level and sustainability of your funding.*

Effective collaboration is central to your leadership's ability to cast the vision and actually empower your institution to a vital, engaged, highly relevant and highly valued future. Isolation from any constituency ultimately means atrophy of the relationship --

possibly even death. *Real life is rooted in engagement and active, on-going collaboration.*

JESUS THE MODEL OF PERCEIVED RELEVANCE

Consider Jesus. He lived with, walked among, and responded to people where they were -- in cafes, by the seashore, in the markets, in their homes and, yes, from time to time in the synagogues and temple. He called on his audience, his immediate constituency, to judge him not by His word but, if they believed nothing else, by His works. ⁽³⁾ At least four times between John 5 and John 12 Jesus indicates that his audiences should examine His works -- not just His words. And, in that crucial exchange between Jesus and Philip in the upper room (John 14) it was again His works to which Jesus referred as the proof of his life and ministry validity.

A particularly interesting study is to examine the 22-23 individuals, one on one encounters between Jesus and those who came to him. They varied from those with intellectual/theological questions like Nicodemus, the "rich young ruler," and the lawyer in Luke 10 to the broken minds, bodies, and hope like the so-called Syrophenician woman, Blind Bartemaeus, Jairus, and others.

Well over 85% of those who came to Jesus and that He address directly, one on one, were those with real, practical life issues affecting every hour of their day. Ordinary people with extraordinary but widely understood and appreciated life problems. No wonder word about Him spread like wildfire through the countryside and it was perceived by ordinary people that *He taught them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes.* (Matthew 7:28-29)

If the Second Person of the Trinity is willing to be judged by His works, how much more must we not just operate our institutions based on traditions, dated vision, or old paradigms. We, too, must be ready to be judged every single day by *the effectiveness, the relevance* of our programs.

COLLABORATION QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER FOR YOUR INSTITUTION

On The Campus:

A spirit of collaboration that genuinely affects an institution always starts with leadership. As a leader, you need to believe in, preach 'the gospel' of collaboration, and actually practice it yourself by supporting ideas, people, and policies that specifically favor collaboration vs. isolation.

- Is collaboration a key part of your mission statement (*how you do what you do*) and your stated spiritual and educational values?

- Do your Trustees believe in collaboration and, along with your leadership, affirm the idea, 'preach it' themselves, and hold you and the institution accountable to those values.
- Do the various departments at your school meet *regularly* to discuss plans, policy, and programs?
- Does faculty *regularly* work together to develop *cross-disciplinary or interdepartmental* courses and field experiences related to the course work?
- Are there *regular* opportunities for administration, faculty, staff, and students to meet and work together to suggest ideas for innovation or effectiveness, give input to the school's policies, strategies, services, curriculum, and related programs?

Getting the on-campus community thinking and working together is a critical and major step toward an institution's engagement and effective collaboration.

In The Community -- The "Outside World":

Do you and others in the institution *really believe* that the outcomes of your institution need to be relevant to and demonstrated in the community as well as the church and its grass roots ministries?

- Have you considered actual joint projects -- strategic alliances with churches, ministries, or community agencies which would bring new relevance, diversity of learning opportunities, and infuse a spirit of innovation into your programs?
- Are community leaders of business, government, social service agencies, or churches or denominational regularly invited to the campus?
- Are community leaders ever consulted on institution priorities and programs, ever used as resources when planning, or asked to lecture, do talks, or share about the challenges of their workplace and responsibilities? Is there an active program to facilitate students interacting with these leaders?
- Do you have a institution department regularly in touch with key sectors of the community, including churches and other Christian ministries regarding their needs, opportunities for student volunteer service, apprenticeships, other ways students can relate their academic experience to the real world?
- Is your campus concerned about the churches your students come from, pray for their ministry effectiveness, and pray for your students who go back to work in those churches? Prioritizing what we pray for is another sign of integration and partnership with those we seek to serve rather than isolation.

Other Key Constituencies:

Consider other seminaries and Christian colleges/universities, your alumni, the parents of your students or alumni, and -- your funders. A few examples:

- With other institutions have you considered sharing faculty; establishing joint programs that allow cross registration, cut cost, and give your students access to otherwise unavailable curriculum?
- Have you considered joint ministry, research, or program development with other schools -- expanding each school's capacity and opening up new sectors -- doing things together you could never do alone?
- Do you see alumni as a continuing asset other than primarily a source of income -- potentially the school's best advocates to the rest of the world? Can they possibly play a valuable regular role in giving input -- helping shape the institution's future based on their own experience and belief in the school's mission?
- Have you had the courage or vision to invite your funders to actually be a part of the institution life; providing input to the plans and policies and helping you evaluate the school's effectiveness? Do you imagine your funders have anything to say to your students that might have value?

SOME ESSENTIALS -- BEST PRACTICES FOR EFFECTIVE COLLABORATION

Collaboration for collaboration's sake is a dead end. It is not a fad, new technique, or trendy idea to try. It takes long-term vision by the leadership along with their commitment, and constant attention.

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| 1. Effective collaboration is about a powerful, commonly owned vision. | 5. Effective collaboration is a process not an event. |
| 2. Effective collaboration has limited, achievable objectives. | 6. Effective collaboration acknowledges & meets expectations of key constituencies |
| 3. Effective collaboration is built on trusting relationships. | 7. Effective collaboration focuses on what the participants have in common. |
| 4. Effective collaboration needs a committed facilitator. | |

Above all remember that effective collaboration is a spiritual battle. Satan will go to any length to destroy relationships in the Body of Christ. Pro-active, constant prayer is vital.

(1) *Well Connected: Releasing Power, Restoring Hope Through Kingdom Partnerships*, Phill Butler, (pp 47--92), Authentic Media, Colorado Springs, 2006.

(2) *Organizing Higher Education for Collaboration: A Guide For Campus Leaders*, Adrianna J. Kezar and Jaime Lester, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, 2009 (pp 21-34).

(3) John 5:1-44, 10:22-25, 10:37, 11:45-48, 12:37-43.

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