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Brief 10: Lessons on Supporting Change Through Multi-institutional Projects

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NERCHE BRIEF

New England Resource Center for Higher Education
November 2001

The following Brief from the New England Resource Center for Higher Education (NERCHE) is a distillation of the work by members of NERCHE's think tanks and projects from a wide range of institutions. NERCHE Briefs emphasize policy implications and action agendas from the point of view of the people who tackle the most compelling issues in higher education in their daily work lives. With support from the Ford Foundation, NERCHE disseminates these pieces to a targeted audience of higher education leaders and media contacts. The Briefs are designed to add critical information and essential voices to the development of higher education policies and the improvement of practice at colleges and universities.

Lessons on Supporting Change Through Multi-institutional Projects

The New England Resource Center for Higher Education's (NERCHE) Civic Engagement Cluster¹ is a multi-institutional model for strengthening civic engagement in higher education across ten institutions simultaneously. Reflecting NERCHE's mission to promote community, collaboration, and change in higher education, the Cluster is based on the premise that significant change can be accomplished most effectively through collaboration and communication across institutions. The purpose of this Brief is to pass on some key lessons learned in the pilot year of this project about laying the groundwork for collaboration and improving institutional practice.

NERCHE deliberately selected ten diverse institutions for participation in the Cluster to represent key sectors of higher education. The Cluster institutions differ in mission, size, geographic location, and student demographics. They incorporate a variety of strategies for preparing students as socially responsible citizens and strengthening their civic missions.²

More often than not, colleges and universities operate autonomously, competing with each other for students and resources. Yet, especially in recent years, institutions of higher education are discovering the benefits of intentionally joining forces to accomplish major change, not only on their own campuses, but also in the higher education industry. The Civic Engagement Cluster aimed to be a learning organization through which participating colleges and universities look for new and better ways of doing things. Institutional leadership teams from each campus came together for a

series of structured sessions and informal conversations to establish cross-institutional task forces and partnerships around common institutional agendas.

By participating in a structured exchange of information and ideas, including face-to-face meetings, the Cluster institutions have improved and strengthened their own projects and institutional practices, developed new programs and initiatives, and created the infrastructure for collaborative work. Elements that contributed to success were:

Internal Visibility Cluster participants used their affiliation with the national project as an opportunity to tap the expertise of individuals on campus who had previously been less active in civic engagement initiatives. The project encouraged institutions to convene teams composed of faculty from different disciplines, program leaders, students, and administrators who then contributed new perspectives and expertise. For those already involved in civic engagement projects, the Cluster made their accomplishments more visible.

Funding The infusion of funds from the Cluster Project built institutional capacity. Some campuses hired administrative support, (e.g. full-time project coordinators). Others offered stipends for various projects. This included undergraduate students involved in K-12 programming, graduate students who planned undergraduate courses, and faculty members who led small group discussions on teaching strategies. The project also provided an opportunity to support previously under funded program areas with potential to support the civic engagement agenda.

Accountability Participating campuses were responsible for producing budgets, action plans, presentations, and reports. The multi-institutional structure supplied incentive and gave them leverage to mobilize others on their campuses due to deadlines and the need to account for how the financial and human resources were expended.

Time Time at multi-institutional Cluster meetings was made available for participants to develop individual campus action plans, time they would not have otherwise had for this kind of strategizing. Equipped with new ideas and energy developed through cross-institutional work and having had time to hammer out plans for their institutions, participants returned to their campuses and engaged others there in conversations about civic engagement.

Local and National Credibility Cluster participants and their work were featured at national conferences. This exposure gave their work added credibility back on campus and across the country.

Recommendations

Based on the experience of the Civic Engagement Cluster, we offer the following recommendations for advancing institutional initiatives while setting the stage for collaboration.

- Identify other institutions committed to broad institutional innovations, which offer a diversity of perspectives and experience in curricular offerings, student demographics, institutional mission, and resources. While diversity is a clear strength, it is important, however, to establish connecting mechanisms, such as shared agendas, among institutions to provide commonality.
- Develop clear project goals that will focus and stretch individual institutional initiatives.
- Establish shared working definitions about the purpose of the collaborative effort.
- In building institutional teams, bring together a broad range of institutional representatives: faculty, academic and student affairs administrators, professional staff, and students. Ensure that team members with decision-making authority are present at each collaborative meeting.
- Obtain adequate institutional support for release time, secretarial assistance, and travel.
- Establish mechanisms for individual institutions to get to know each other's institutional ways of operating and understandings of project aims early on in the process. Sustain cross-institutional communication through regular meetings, task forces, and partnerships focused on common change agendas.
- Join forces with national associations in order to support, augment, and showcase the campus' work in institutes, conference sessions, publications, and major policy initiatives.
- Secure multi-year support to build sustained collaboration around identified institutional agendas.
- Ensure that the core staff of the multi-institutional project has substantive expertise in the content area of the project, group processes, and institutional change.

Conclusions

While multi-institutional projects aim to have an impact that reaches beyond participating campuses, they must be designed to improve the colleges and universities involved. The experience of the Civic Engagement Cluster documents the added value to individual institutional efforts by providing formal mechanisms to bring institutions engaged in similar endeavors together. Benefits accrue to students, faculty, and the institution as a whole. **For students**, the educational experience is deepened as a result of innovative approaches to curriculum and pedagogy inspired by inter-institutional exchange. **For faculty**, support for innovative practices is enhanced, new ideas about curriculum and pedagogy are acquired, and opportunities for cross-

disciplinary collaborations are increased. **For the institution**, planning and policy development can incorporate successful practices from other institutions and thereby better utilize limited institutional resources.

To fulfill the potential for transforming higher education as a system requires a long-term commitment, including three to five years of sustained funding, and a foundation of relationships sturdy enough to support future collaborative work.

¹ The Civic Engagement Cluster includes: Alverno College (Wisconsin); Kansas State University (Kansas); Morehouse College (Georgia); Oglala Lakota College (South Dakota); Olivet College (Michigan); Portland State University (Oregon); Rutgers University (New Jersey); Spelman College (Georgia); the University of Denver (Colorado); and the University of Texas at El Paso.

² Project recommendations about strengthening civic learning in undergraduate education are reported in *Maximizing Civic Learning and Social Responsibility* which can be found, along with information on the Civic Engagement Cluster, at www.nerche.org.

Do you have a response to the issues raised in this Brief? NERCHE welcomes responses to this Brief. Would you like more information on Nerche think Tanks and other programs: Please contact us at:

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