

## Interdependence as Strategy: the Kalamazoo-Lake Forest Project

Delivered by Jo Ellen Parker, NITLE Executive Director, at Kalamazoo College 6/8/2005

*Context:* A few words about higher education and technology adoption.

Higher ed has a love-hate relationship with new technologies. On the one hand, we trumpet the potential of new technologies to increase access, disseminate materials, and revolutionize pedagogy. (Examples of radio, cable TV, etc.) On the other hand, we have repeatedly seen promised revolutions fail to materialize and have become skeptical. Also, we tend to assume a fair degree of doubt about the educational value of new technologies. (Point and Click slide.) Until it is proven to us that a technology supports learning – either directly or by creating administrative efficiencies that free up resources to be rededicated to teaching and learning – we tend to suspect that it is only so much pointing and clicking, so to speak.

Another factor is the love-hate relationship the higher education community has to change, generally. Someone has said – sorry I can't remember who at the moment – that higher education is a conservative institution made up of thousands of progressive minds. To put this another way, (SLIDE with

quote from Clark Kerr.) While it is our business to explore new intellectual frontiers, it is also our business to preserve important cultural traditions, and colleges and universities are notorious for the, well, deliberate pace of governance and incremental approach to structural change. This has seemed particularly true in the area of technology, where higher education in fact lags behind many other sectors of society in the use of digital systems and resources. George Landow, a scholar of Victorian literature and textual studies, wrote this about 15 years ago: (SLIDE with quote from Landow.) He was, it's clear now, too pessimistic: computers are almost everywhere in much shorter time than he predicted, but still we take his point.

Then, when we do adopt or experiment with new technologies, it takes a while for us academics to figure out that we are actually at a moment of paradigm shift – and I mean this in the Thomas Kuhn, structure of scientific revolutions sense. The new technology initially seems to be a useful environment or device but does not initially appear to substantively change the nature of our work or the angle of our approach. There's a wonderful image that I think sums up this point pretty well: (Airplane Slide: Larry Cuban, "Teachers and Machines.")

So I start from these three contextual observations: the academic community tends to be ambivalent about the potentials of new technologies, tends in general to be slow to embrace change, and when new technologies enter into libraries, classrooms, and offices it takes time for their paradigm-shifting implications to become apparent.

This brings me to *the heart of what I want to say*: In order to reap the benefits and potentials of new technologies, institutions generally – and particularly liberal arts colleges – are going to need to figure out how to make a fundamental paradigm shift in terms of institutional strategies. In fact, the chief strategic question facing every small college today is what can and should be done independently and what can and should be done interdependently because of newly available technological capacities. This is true on both sides of the house -- in curriculum, pedagogy, and academic resources, as well as in administrative and managerial processes. This is the paradigm shift; a 21<sup>st</sup> century college must learn to understand its value in what it gives ACCESS to, not in what it OWNS or CONTAINS. In order to do this, certain cultural traditions and value assumptions need to be challenged. But the rewards are significant. The colleges that can position themselves as portals onto extended networks, rather than as silos, will be

vital and appealing to the best prospective students and candidates for faculty positions.

The project in which Kalamazoo and Lake Forest are engaged is bold and valuable for precisely this reason – because (with of course reasonable safeguards) these two institutions are willing to accept interdependence to achieve better results individually by strategically adopting a strategy of interdependence.

Let me begin to flesh out these thoughts by describing a (perhaps obvious) piece of historical context. From the colonial period through the intense, expansive wave of college foundings in the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century until very recently indeed, American liberal arts colleges were for the most part necessarily designed and understood as stand-alone enterprises, self-sufficient outposts. (Silos of knowledge and culture in the cornfields. . . ) The simple fact was that both students and faculty depended almost exclusively on locally-held resources; the specific volumes held in the campus library, the collective knowledge of a set of resident faculty members, and so on. Small American colleges, like the small American towns in which they tended to be located, therefore naturally developed a

culture that valued self-sufficiency. In these circumstances, a college's "strategy" was appropriately to collect as comprehensive a set of resources as possible – in terms of faculty, more books for the library, an art collection -- and then make an art form of making do with what was at hand to fill in the gaps. (The pressure to be all –inclusive and self-sustaining was perhaps slightly less on colleges located in major urban areas, who could count on the local environment to provide access certain amenities, whether those were books held in other public or private collections, museums, amusements for students, and so on.) But still, the values of being independent and self-sustaining took deep root.

Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, though, a number of developments began to change this situation, albeit slowly. Opportunities for small colleges to interact with larger intellectual, cultural, and material networks began to increase and it became easier and more rewarding for colleges to look outward. Early on in the century, just to take one example, the growth of disciplinary and professional societies with their journals and conferences, along with improvements in transportation infrastructure, meant that faculty could not only regularly receive new work in their fields from "outside" but also could more regularly interact in person with remote colleagues at conferences. Better roads and reliable vans made ferrying books between

campuses for inter-library loan feasible. Cheap and extensive commercial air travel increased the circulation of guest artists and lecturers, fax machines speeded up the process of sharing documents with remote colleagues, computers made it easy to search multiple library catalogs simultaneously, and on and on. The cumulative effect of all these developments was that through the last quarter of the last century the boundaries of every campus became more and more permeable in ways you can probably all identify and which it would be tedious for me to belabor here. One of many structural and organizational expressions of the new potential to open up the campus was the explosive proliferation of consortial organizations and enterprises of various kinds in the last 50 years, whether the Claremont Colleges, the Five Colleges of Massachusetts, the GLCA (to which Kalamazoo belongs) and others – all created in order to direct and organize the increasingly felt need for colleges to reach beyond their own borders to achieve important goals, to reflect the recognition that going it alone was no longer a good or even a possible idea.

That's a bit of a meander, but my first point is that, while digital technologies are often characterized as revolutionary in their impact on the campus (and in many ways of course they are) to my mind they can also be understood as simply continuing and accelerating a history that has been

incrementally transforming the academy throughout our lifetimes. And with the advent of digital technologies the move toward opening up the college, to creating structures for the sharing and distributing of important resources, will only speed up and intensify. In the early decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, colleges – even those in small towns, with modest library collections, limited numbers of faculty positions, and tight IT budgets –are confronted with the unprecedented ability to access academic, curricular, cultural, and administrative resources located anywhere in the networked universe.

They will not only be able to do so, but they will need to do so. Digital technologies are costly, in terms of equipment, software, and staff. An article in the most recent Educause Quarterly reported that the #1 concern of IT leaders on college campuses is how to fund continued technology development. This stuff costs, and so do the people who know how to make it work and keep it working. And this stuff often requires scale: licensing an expensive specialized application may not make sense if you have only one faculty user interested in it. You may want a java programmer to customize open source applications but not be able to support a dedicated position. And so on. And so it has become increasingly obvious that institutions must accept the necessity of finding ways to leverage collaborative relationships to pay for, manage, and support IT.

I am convinced of two things: first, seizing these opportunities is an issue of institutional survival; colleges that are able to engage them strategically will be able to flourish in the foreseeable future and those that do not will not. Second, unless colleges seize these opportunities now the educational traditions and values dear to us may not be transmitted to the educational institutions of the future. In other words, it may not be a question only of survival for specific institutions but for a pedagogical tradition as well.

Why do I say this? Digital technologies and resources will increasingly redefine the way academic world works, as they have redefined large swaths of the commercial, social, and cultural worlds. (I probably don't need to say much about this!) And there is little doubt ; that digital technologies and resources are and will continue to be primarily created, managed, and developed by large commercial, governmental, or research entities -- (because of the intensity of resources needed for creation and the scale needed for maintenance and development) – which do not share the developmental, person-oriented, and reflective values of liberal education. Now, we all love and have embraced in our personal activities many of the values of the cyber-world: just in time spontaneous information gathering,

the ability to store and access huge amount of data in convenient and portable forms, quickness of interaction and of change, and so on. But I think we recognize that the digital values of speed, spontaneity, convenience, standardization, ubiquity, and scale are not the same as the values of deliberation, assessment, individualization, ethical reflection, and critical thinking we also hold dear. (A few years ago, one regularly heard the argument that colleges should avoid or minimize the adoption of digital technologies because digital values were the enemies of educational values - - online registration would depersonalize the advising process, email would erode interpersonal community, faculty who put materials on line would never see their students any more, everyone would be so ruthlessly connected that no one would ever stop and think again. It seems to me that we are generally in a different place now.) It isn't that technology isn't problematic and challenging to us in many ways, or that there isn't tension between the goods of digital culture and of academic culture; it's just that we've turned our attention almost imperceptibly from talking about how to avoid these problems to how to manage them; how to get the best of both worlds. The question now is how can a liberal arts college carry its educational values into the digital future, because if we don't we can feel pretty sure that nobody else will.

The old cultural values of self-sufficiency and asset accumulation persist, and they work against the potential for collaboration created by increasingly easy communication and resource sharing. These values are often expressed in terms of concern with “quality” and of “competitive advantage.” In this framework competitive advantage consists of having more (books, laboratories, majors, off-campus study programs) than other colleges have, and when that is not possible it consists in persuading people that what one does have is better than what the other college has. And thinking in this way inevitably leads college leaders to certain strategic assumptions – the strategy being to acquire and control as many material and human resources as possible, although of course at the lowest possible cost. And this assumption makes interdependence suspect.

Let me mention a couple of examples. For many years, I worked at Bryn Mawr College, which as many of you know cooperates in a very close relationship with Haverford and Swarthmore Colleges. In some curricular areas, these colleges have agreed to allow their academic programs to become interdependent: for example, by agreement Bryn Mawr maintains the theater program but offers no music, while Haverford maintains the music program and offers no theater. Both programs serve students from both campuses equally. This arrangement is obviously advantageous – it

eliminates the redundant costs of running two very small programs side by side, allows for a greater critical mass of students in the major and for performance groups, it makes positions more attractive to faculty candidates, and so on. And this has been the case for a quarter of the century, with very good results. Yet within the last two years I had a conversation with an alumna who made the argument that Bryn Mawr “should be embarrassed” for not running its OWN music department. She clearly saw her alma mater’s dependence on another institution for any part of the curriculum as a weakness, rather than celebrating the fact that her college had found a way to support a fuller program at lower cost.

Such questions extend far beyond curriculum. Must a “good” college run its own counseling service, or can it responsibly outsource this function to a local provider? (or its dining service, or grounds maintenance, or housing, or any of a number of other services?) Is it a diminution of quality for an institution to acknowledge that it would be better off not doing some things on its own, or that there are some things other entities might do better? These are not simple questions: another example from the library world illustrates further.

Several groups of colleges around the country have banded together to share off-site storage facilities. These are useful, as providing cost-effective

and safe storage for rarely-used books in a centrally located facility from which each campus can get ready access to the stored volumes when necessary, while freeing up valuable and costly shelf space in the libraries themselves for more regularly used materials. So far so good. But as these projects progress, it inevitably becomes apparent that the collaborating libraries, among them, own multiple identical copies of the same volume, which has been checked out a total of three times in the last 50 years and not at all since 1982. How many copies of such a book does it make sense for the colleges, considered together, to store? Probably one. So which one should it be? Probably the one in best condition. So the others should be deaccessioned? Well, there's a problem. It is the nature of libraries to collect, not to un-collect, and the decision to prune holdings is a serious one. And then, if too many books are deaccessioned, the library holding numbers will drop – and since those are reported to accreditation bodies and published in ratings guides, a loss of prestige and perceived “quality” is threatened. The library in question therefore may balk at actually discarding volumes, and the potential value of the collaborative scheme is therefore not fully realized as duplicate volumes fill up high-density shelving.

The point in both these examples is a simple one: there are cultural attitudes and assumptions about values on campus that exert counter-forces

against the ability of the institution to realize even some of the simplest, clearest benefits of collaborative interdependence.

Now, collaborative interdependence creates real anxieties. (SLIDE Nobel/Edison.) Admittedly, there are sound reasons for colleges to be slow to relinquish their “own” resources. A recent situation at a Midwestern institution illustrates this. JSTOR, as many of you know, is a collaborative resource that provides electronic versions of back copies of academic journals so that academic libraries need not commit shelf space and staff time to maintaining large collections of rarely-consulted and highly-specialized materials. In an effort to realize the benefit of its JSTOR participation, this college developed a plan to deaccession materials duplicated in JSTOR’s collection after a process intended to determine whether in specific cases local use warranted their retention. Through a concatenation of small errors, however, a number of volumes that should not have been discarded under the terms of this process were, leading to serious faculty distress and incurring the cost and inconvenience of re-acquiring them. Such things will, inevitably, happen, and they become the cautionary tales invoked to warn against putting many eggs at all in somebody else’s basket.

It may be useful to note here that while this issue may press with particular force on the academic world, it is not by any means only pertinent to the academy. This shift is taking place in the business and corporate worlds as well as in the academic and cultural worlds. In business too the shift from measuring quality in terms of *access to what's needed* rather than in terms of *ownership* of it and from measuring *organizational strength in terms of connectivity and flexibility rather than self-sufficiency and comprehensiveness*, is taking place. (SLIDE from New Yorker.)

And so back to the title I gave these remarks: interdependence as strategy. Successful future educational institutions (like successful future businesses) will define their strategies, I believe, around creating strategic interdependencies, identifying work and resources they can share rather than duplicate. Colleges will succeed in the near future by **doing less while providing more**. It's about the shift from saying a library is significant because it owns X number of volumes to saying a library is significant because it can deliver any of X volumes into student or faculty hands within a day no matter who owns those volumes. It's about the shift from talking about what "our faculty" teach to talking about what courses are available to our students, no matter whose faculty teaches them.

Now, I'd like to emphasize that much of what passes under the name of collaboration, while very very good and important, stops short of creating actual interdependence. It's one thing for faculty to discuss and confer and share information; it's another thing entirely for them to allow their work and resources to become interdependent. It's the difference between going to a conference and team-teaching, for example. It's the difference between being involved and being committed. I'm reminded of a quote you may be familiar with, about the difference between involvement and commitment; in a bacon and eggs breakfast, the chicken was involved but the pig was committed. A strategy of interdependence accepts and manages committed relationships that cross institutional borders to allow core functions – teaching, research, or administrative functions – to be improved.

Which brings us to the question of what a strategy of interdependence should look like. Obviously, different for every institution and every situation, but there are some fundamental and primary questions that must be asked along the way.

- What are the characteristics that must not be compromised if the institution is to retain its identity? A good collaborative strategy will either strengthen these or focus on areas which are not central to identity.

- Who are appropriate partners? You need partners to play tennis, or a duet, or to practice German conversation. But not one person is likely to be best choice for all those activities. Institutional partnerships are the same and must be chosen carefully and with specific requirements in mind.
- How can risk be spread as thinly and evenly as possible? That is, how can risk to all partners be minimized, and how can all partners feel that risks are equally distributed? Plan Bs/Cs/Ds, disaster recovery plans, mutual indemnification, and other such backups are essential here.
- How can rewards be spread as thickly and evenly as possible? A good, interdependent collaboration leaves all parties better, with a fair share of the benefits. It's a win – win.
- What incentives can be created to encourage individuals, departments, units, or whole institutions to stop doing things that they were previously rewarded for doing? Interdependencies require that many staff people relin their work, develop new relationships, and learn to think in expanded and different contexts. Careful planning to ensure that staff are given appropriate training, support, and incentives to navigate these changes is crucial?

- How can key constituencies – trustees, faculty, staff, alumnae – be encouraged to see partnerships as expressions of institutional strength and progress? The degree to which such projects are also exercises in culture change should not be underestimated; special attention to helping the community understand the benefits and advantages of doing business differently is important.

Finally, a few words about the collaborative project being designed by Kalamazoo and Lake Forest Colleges. I am not a technologist, and so I can't speak to the merits of the specifics of their plans – although I do know they have had top level consultation and the close and careful attention of senior campus leaders. But I can say that I admire it very much as a strategic effort to provide better service on both campuses through genuine collaboration – by mutual dependence on shared systems that are more stable, more up to date, and more capacious than those either campus could support alone. At several regional and national meetings of liberal arts colleges, it has been mentioned as a project under consideration, and the idea unfailingly elicits interest and excitement from other campuses. By undertaking such a project, Kalamazoo and Lake Forest both position themselves among the most forward-looking and innovative campuses, as leaders who are willing to put their resources where there values are.

Because finally, of course, although the Kalamazoo-Lake Forest project is an administrative one, we all understand that the stronger and more efficient the administrative infrastructure is the better it is able to support teaching and learning, which is really the point.