

# Change and Collaboration: The Urban Collaborative

BY SHERRY H. PENNEY

## Abstract

*A collaborative effort among five academic institutions in the greater Boston area has resulted in improved application and admissions processes, a more efficient student transfer process among the institutions, improved graduation rates, greater commonality and articulation of curricula across the participating institutions, expanded faculty development, and increased fund raising. This essay discusses potential reasons for the success of this collaborative model.*

Metropolitan areas frequently have several academic institutions to serve their needs. Financial resources and capacity are often insufficient for any single institution to meet all the educational needs of the community. Independent and uncoordinated institutions often create inconveniences for students, who may wish to take advantage of the opportunities available at more than one institution. These factors alone dictate that new models of higher education must emerge which emphasize collaboration among universities, colleges, and high schools. As noted by Gray and Chamberlain (this issue), such collaborative efforts often fail. The history of failures they describe, however, are largely collaborations that were mandated by policy makers. This paper describes a voluntary collaboration that has been implemented with great success in the Boston area over the last seven years. It is the Greater Boston Urban Education Collaborative, an initiative of the University of Massachusetts Boston and area community colleges: Bunker Hill Community College, Massachusetts Bay Community College, Massasoit Community College, and Roxbury Community College. The Collaborative serves more than 33,000 students in the greater Boston metropolitan region.

The original impetus for the Collaborative came from the chief executive officers of three of the institutions. Each sought to strengthen their collective urban agendas and to expand higher education access to students of all backgrounds throughout greater Boston. At the same time, the institutional leaders also recognized the opportunities to improve the practical aspects of the transition from community college to the university, the range of choices offered prospective students, and the clarity with which the students and the community could see the system of higher education working for them.

From the beginning, the University of Massachusetts Boston (UMass Boston) had accepted many transfer students from area community colleges. The Board of Higher Education in Massachusetts had encouraged joint admissions agreements and transfer compacts, and UMass Boston had articulation agreements in specific programs with several of the state's community colleges. Despite these agreements, it was apparent that a transfer system would work more smoothly if programs in the various partner schools were interwoven more completely. Ultimately, the Collaborative grew to encompass curricula, course content, testing and placement, faculty development, and joint degree programs. Programs are now more flexible, movement among the colleges and the university is easier, the choices offered prospective students have increased, and student placement is more attuned to individual needs.

Normally, transfer agreements are negotiated by admissions staff. The mission of the Collaborative, however, extended far beyond transfer agreements. In an attempt to institutionalize the cooperative arrangements, the Collaborative chose to involve as many stakeholders as possible, from librarians to enrollment managers, grants officers to facilities staff, and K-12 partners, rather than just the institutions' chief executive officers and admissions staff.

The Urban Collaborative is run by an executive steering committee that consists of two representatives from each institution, appointed by each member's chief executive officer. To enhance the spirit of collaboration, the chairperson of the executive steering committee rotates on an annual basis among the five schools. The committee sets the Collaborative's annual goals; appoints members to various task forces and study, policy, and planning groups; monitors and evaluates their work; and ensures that various institutional policies and decision-making procedures are considered. The steering committee also prepares and disseminates an annual report. Most important, the Collaborative has had strong support since the beginning from the campus administrations, and an annual meeting of the presidents/chancellors with the task force highlights the year's events.

## **Starting with Admissions**

The first steps of the collaboration focused on admissions. Dual admission to UMass Boston and the community colleges is now common. The secondary schools are fully informed about the individual and common admission expectations, as well as the procedures followed by the institutions in the Collaborative. Student performance is monitored closely and progress letters are sent regularly to students. A cross referral process ensures that students who apply to UMass Boston, but do not meet admission criteria, are referred to the community colleges and given precise information about what they will need to do to gain admission to the university.

Coordinated admissions and placement efforts are supported by an enhanced exchange of data among members of the Collaborative, so that the partner two-year colleges can monitor the performance of their transfer students. This information is equally important to the university because two-thirds of its undergraduates enter as transfer students and more than 40 percent of those are from two-year public institutions. Tracking student movement between and among institutions helps develop strategies to improve retention and subsequently to increase the number of students completing degrees.

## **Curriculum**

Curriculum development was the second major area for collaboration. Subject matter task forces have been the main vehicles of curricular development, with the collaboration focusing initially on basic skill education. Mathematics and English task forces have led the way. The mathematics task force, composed of faculty from all five institutions, began its work by comparing assessment and placement processes to facilitate student transfer. It then focused on specific content coverage in the freshman and sophomore-level courses at each of the five institutions by developing a detailed list of mathematical skills and concepts and noting which courses (calculus and below) covered each topic. Examination of each course in such detail was important since the common labels, such as College Algebra or Pre-Calculus, often mean something quite

different from school to school. In the next stage it will consider time-on-task and depth of coverage for each concept.

The mathematics task force has also developed strategies for promoting, coordinating, and assessing the use of technology in the teaching of mathematics. Training workshops for faculty have been held each year on the use of graphing calculators, computers, and the Internet as tools for teaching various levels of mathematics. Recently, a new quantitative reasoning course designed for general education was developed.

The task force was also mindful of the Massachusetts State Department of Education's mathematics curriculum framework, which mandated testing at Grades 4, 8, and 12, and the State Board of Higher Education's mandated entry assessment testing for post secondary education. With this in mind, the mathematics task force sponsored a series of dialogues among secondary school teachers and administrators, as well as two- and four-year college faculty. High school and college faculty also visited each other's classes. Many post-secondary mathematics faculty had never observed a high school class, and, likewise, the high school teachers had never visited college level courses that made extensive use of technology. These visits were very beneficial in advancing mathematics education and easing the transition from K-12 to college.

The task force in English has done similar work, looking at first year curricula and sharing student writing samples. Members of the task force have discussed theoretical and practical placement and exit procedures. They have examined case studies and statistical studies on testing, including computerized testing and the use of portfolios. They are concerned about developmental and ESL students, as well as those in the standard curriculum. The task force has studied various texts on composition in depth. It has developed a booklet of syllabi for freshman English courses that has been shared with each of the five institutions, again to assist the students in a smooth transition.

The Collaborative has sponsored a major Mathematics and English Conference for the past four years that extends the collaborative perspective statewide. Approximately 200 participants from over 25 institutions of higher education and several public school systems join together each June to study classroom theory and practice in these two essential disciplines.

A third subject matter task force emerged the first year to look at science. Unlike the mathematics and English task forces, this one was less successful and did not continue, but it did demonstrate the goal of the Collaborative to push the boundaries. It was difficult for faculty to find common ground because there was such a variety of courses being taught. During the current academic year, science is back on the agenda. The focus is now shifting to collaborative grant writing for the purchase of shared science equipment, to be used in undergraduate research projects, and strategies to increase both minority enrollment in science courses and the total number of science majors. Now focused in new directions, there is renewed enthusiasm for science collaboration across the five schools.

During 1999-2000, a task force on general education emerged to discuss each school's efforts to transition into outcomes-based general education curricula. The task force found a great deal of compatibility among the five general education programs. Its

work now focuses on ways that competencies in critical thinking, critical reading and writing, oral communication skills, quantitative reasoning, team building, and the use of technology are attained and evaluated in First Year Experience courses.

As the work of these first four task forces has become known throughout the university and the community colleges, other departments are showing an interest in forming their own task forces. Faculty in the psychology departments now have asked to form their own subject matter task force. This task force, with faculty from the five schools, will examine the scope and content of each of their courses in much the same way that the mathematics task force has done. It will also discuss pedagogy and share teaching materials.

## **Additional Opportunities for Collaboration**

A natural outgrowth of curricular coordination included addressing the needs at the community colleges and meeting the convenience needs of students by offering university courses at the colleges. UMass Boston courses in Criminal Justice are now offered at Bunker Hill Community College, and courses from UMass Boston's Nursing Program are offered at Cape Cod Community College—a precursor to an invitation to join the Collaborative. Distance learning is an additional arena for collaboration. Each institution is working to reach out to the community's high schools with courses, for example, in advanced mathematics, and to share resources with each other, such as in foreign language offerings.

Faculty exchanges are a new area of collaboration and also bring the expertise of one campus to another and promote mutual understanding in depth. In Fall 2000, a faculty member from Massasoit Community College joined the faculty seminar on Linguistic Diversity in the Classroom, given at UMass Boston, as part of the explorations in pedagogy sponsored by its Center for the Improvement of Teaching.

An additional area where the Urban Collaborative has been successful is in winning grants. In 1994, it received \$384,000 for minority teacher preparation to encourage minority students from Bunker Hill, Roxbury, and UMass Boston to become teachers, primarily in the Boston public schools. This grant provided stipends, tuition waivers, funding for mentors, internships, and job placement assistance, plus close collaboration between teacher trainers and experienced school personnel. In 1997, an additional grant of \$122,000 was awarded from the Massachusetts Board of Higher Education to support the work of the Collaborative. In 1999, a second grant from the Massachusetts Board of Higher Education for \$200,000 funded the dialogue series, the statewide conferences, and provided for the development of a "smart classroom" for teaching quantitative reasoning and computerized testing.

Collaboration has also occurred indirectly as graduates of UMass Boston programs go on to teach in the area's community colleges. For example, graduates of UMass Boston's masters programs in Bilingual/ESL, English, and Critical and Creative Thinking currently teach in a number of community colleges. Several community college faculty and administrators are enrolled in the UMass Boston doctoral program in Higher Education Administration. These connections promote exchange, trust, and communication.

## **Conclusion**

The Urban Collaborative's path to success has not been totally smooth. As stated earlier, the sheer magnitude and variety of courses in science made it more difficult to find common ground. Moreover, a year of "work-to-contract" at the community colleges precluded faculty participation in these voluntary efforts. In addition, insufficient funds inhibited the expanded use of technology. (This problem would have occurred had there been no Collaborative.) Boston has an excellent subway system that has helped to connect the three campuses within the city and facilitates movement by faculty and students, but travel for those from Massachusetts Bay and Massasoit remains difficult. The extensive time demands and crowded student schedules have also been a problem; this new activity represented an added demand on top of many others.

Yet, this experience indicates that collaborative efforts among metropolitan institutions can be successful. The reasons for that success may be multiple. First, it was a voluntary collaboration among institutions, not one dictated by a state oversight committee. Second, each of the participating institutions was already well established and stood to gain from the cooperative efforts. Third, the Collaborative had a clearly specified set of goals. Fourth, the collaboration invited active participation of many throughout all ranks of the institutions. Fifth, the collaboration led to an improved educational system and better service to students, as well as greater retention and graduation rates. Sixth, the Collaborative provided rewards for the participants themselves. Not only is the quality of their work improved, but they have also been revitalized professionally by collaborative endeavors and it has provided faculty with an expanded set of colleagues. Seventh, the success of the Collaborative is documented in the continued assessment of its efforts.

## **Author Information**

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