

# The Collaboration Continuum

Collaboration is a powerful strategy for achieving shared goals and approaching shared opportunities and solving problems. Collaborations are opportunities to accomplish together what can't be done alone. They represent opportunity to solve a shared problem, or meet a common challenge that is clearly and easily relatable to the needs of the participants and the goals of the institution (as illustrated in the Statement of Shared Purpose).

But when we talk about collaboration we tend to use the term rather loosely. When we reference collaboration, we frequently mean something more like *cooperation*, *coordination*, or simple *networking*. All of these strategies have distinct attributes, benefits, risks, and organizational principles as outlined in the Collaboration Continuum:

**Networking:** exchanging information for mutual benefit. This is easy to do; it requires low initial level of trust, limited time availability and no sharing of turf.

**Coordinating:** exchanging information and altering some activities for mutual benefit and to achieve a common purpose. Coordination requires more organizational involvement than networking with a slightly higher level of trust and some sharing of one's "turf."

**Cooperating:** exchanging information, altering activities and sharing resources for mutual benefit and to achieve a common purpose. Cooperation is more formal than coordination and thus requires increased organizational commitment and support and may involve written agreements (Memoranda of Understanding, Project Charters, etc.). Shared resources can include human, financial and technical contributions across organizational boundaries. Cooperation may require a substantial amount of time, high level of trust and significant sharing of turf. Positions may need to be modified to provide time for participation.

**Collaborating:** real collaboration involves exchanging information, altering activities, sharing resources and *enhancing the capacity of another* for mutual benefit and to achieve a common goal. The qualitative difference between collaboration and cooperation is that partners are willing to learn from each other to become better at what they do, together. Collaborators are clear that the importance of partners' success is as great as their own - their own success depends on their partners' success. Collaborating means that that partners share the risks, responsibilities and rewards. It requires a substantial time commitment, very high level of trust, and sharing of turf.

In the context of these definitions, to what extent are you Collaborating? Networking? Or Cooperating? Or are you engaged in some combination of these models?

It is important to understand that each of these strategies can be appropriate for particular circumstances. There are situations where it may be sufficient to network and provide correct and updated information on programs and services. In other circumstances, organizations and teams may need to develop more complex relationships to meet objectives and needs more effectively and completely. The definitions presented above will help organizations make appropriate choices about the working relationships they must develop or strive towards to achieve stated objectives.

Collaborative efforts are only successful in facilitating change if they are supported from the top down and the bottom up. Administrative support is needed to allow front line staff to make decisions about agency resources shared in a collaborative effort. Both, front line and administrative staff must be open and willing to go beyond “business as usual.”

To the degree that agencies are able to overcome the three main barriers: time, turf and trust, they will engage in collaborations of different complexity and commitment. The ability to overcome barriers will be reflected in the progressive continuum of collaborative strategies.

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## Attributes of the Continuum

**Exchanging Information.** Successful collaborations demonstrate attention to facilitating information exchange. This is accomplished by establishing regularly scheduled meetings, creating dedicated email lists or some other communication tool, creating a project website, establishing a communications program with assigned roles, and adopting a project progress reporting mechanism.

**Organizational Involvement.** Inter-institutional collaborations require significant commitment to being involved in the program. Elements of such involvement can include sponsors and champions to ensure programmatic adoption (Sponsors publicly support the program and the Champions actively organize the work); and clear identification of required roles with specific individuals committed to the activities associated with the roles.

**Altering assignments and workflow.** Collaborations result in new responsibilities for team members and participants. that require modification of work patterns to ensure that we don't simply layer work onto already busy faculty and staff. Modifications can include a review of schedules and workflow, modified departmental objectives, added or reallocated resources (e.g., positions, technology, etc.), and modification of budget allocations to support the program.

**Sharing Resources.** Collaboration requires sharing of resources. For example, institutional partners commit staff for project assignments; administrative services (e.g., accounting, IT

expertise, help desk services) are shared between; technology (hardware and/or software) is shared or co-funded between organizations; and budget allocations are shared between organizations.

**Increase Staff Allocation.** Collaborations require changes to existing work flow. These changes can include changing schedules to enable staff participation; position descriptions and responsibilities are modified to ensure sustained participation; release time is provided to faculty participants; stipends are made available to faculty and/or staff; and professional development programs may be updated.

**Sharing Risks and Rewards.** True collaborations share both the rewards and the risks associated with new ventures. When this element is pronounced in collaboration, it can take the form of several attributes including: development of a risk management review to collectively understand the opportunities and challenges; participating campuses may undertake an analysis of risks and rewards; and partners may outline a risk/reward management program.

**Trust.** Trust is a critical component of working together across organizational boundaries. It is important to foster a culture of trust by acknowledging the previous successes of partners, respecting the reality of existing responsibilities, seeking out differing viewpoints, and helping everyone see where programs, resources, and their time intersect and how partners fit into the project program.

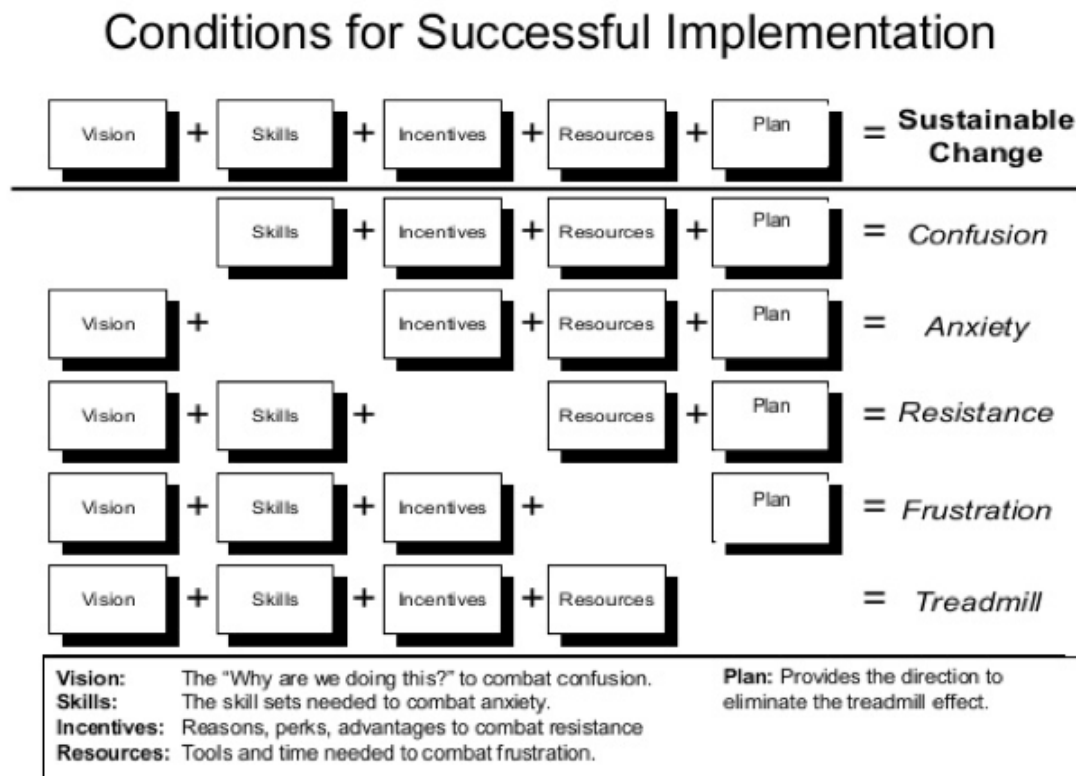
**Written Agreements.** While it is not recommended that signed agreements resembling contracts be entered into early in the process of launching a collaboration (too many contracts too soon do not lend themselves to a trusting relationship), guiding documents that outline the collaboration are helpful. These can include a simple Project Charter or a Problem Statement or Statement of Shared Purpose. More formal, signed, agreements can include a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), nondisclosure agreement, or an actual signed contract.

**Learning From Each Other.** Successful collaborations provide the opportunity for partners to learn from one another. Possible mechanisms include scheduling facilitated inter-institutional workshops, cross-training workshops, publication of findings and results by consortia members, and scheduling inter-institutional workshops co-lead by consortial members from different institutions.

*The Collaboration Continuum survey instrument is adapted from the work of Arthur T. Himmelman, HIMMELMAN Consulting. The instrument has been modified for higher education. Elements are republished here with the permission of the original author. The Continuum distinguishes between Networking, Coordinating, Cooperating, and Collaborating.*

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# Equation for Change



Knoster, T., Villa, R., & Thousand, J. (2000)

In embarking on a program of this significance it is worth taking the time to prepare a strategy for managing change. There are observable attributes of successful programmatic change and they can be loosely identified as:

**Vision:** A vivid image of the desired future that will result from the adoption and implementation of the project.

**Skills:** Proficiency that is necessary to successfully perform tasks required by the project.

**Incentives:** Something specific that encourages and motivates action.

**Resources:** The means to achieve project success including money, staff, support, equipment, and facilities.

**A Plan:** Steps that must be taken for development and implementation to succeed are clear and available to all participants.

**Buy-in:** Team members agree to participate based on shared ideas, value, purpose, and understanding.

**Actionable first steps:** Clearly stated initial milestone to start the project are present and available to all partners.

**Plan for evaluation:** A framework to understand and describe the extent to which we are successful has been developed and is available to all partners and team members for review.

*The Equation for Change survey instrument is adapted from the work of Timothy P. Knoster, Ed.D., Bloomsburg University of Pennsylvania.*

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## Program Sustainability

### Five Attributes of Sustainable Programs

**Support.** Successful collaborations have public champions – internal and/or external – who actively advocate for the program and who have the ability to garner additional support and attract new resources from within their institution or the consortium.

**Partnerships and Shared Leadership.** In a successful collaboration diverse individuals, departments, and institutions are invested in the development and sustainability of the program. Such programs have effective and vibrant communication pathways between community participants. Further, the participants – both faculty and staff – are involved and invested and committed to the program.

**Organizational Capacity.** Collaboration means that participating institutions will be doing new work and using resources in new ways. It is critical that the participating institutions have the capacity to organize themselves to accomplish the new work while continuing to complete existing tasks. Attributes of a collaboration with such organizational capacity include: clear integration of project activities into the operations of the institutions, demonstration that organizational systems are in place to support the new program requirements, demonstration that institutional leadership effectively articulates the vision of the program to constituents and partners, and the same leadership has established effective organizational designs to efficiently manage program staff and resources.

**Communications.** Communication - external as well as internal - is a key attribute of any collaboration. Attributes of a successful communication plan can include communication program to secure and maintain external awareness and support, effective communication from program staff about the rationale for the program to all participating institutions (and funding agencies), a plan that clearly demonstrates the program value to the larger academic community, is marketed and distributed in a way that generates broad interest, and results in increased community awareness of the issues and opportunities of the project.

**Strategic Planning.** Successful collaborations have a strategic foundation. That foundation includes plans for future resource needs, a long-term financial plan, a sustainability plan, evidence that the program goals and objectives are clearly understood by all stakeholders, and clearly outlined roles and responsibilities for all stakeholders.