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The Evolution of a Multi-Instructional Teaching Center (MITC) in a Metropolitan University System

The University of Houston System (UHS) and its four academic institutions have adopted and utilized a "co-opetition" approach in creating a "Multi-Instructional Teaching Center" (MITC). The lessons learned in the planning, implementation, and the collaborative/competitive approach in the delivery of educational programs and courses in the Houston metropolitan area have been highly useful educationally, economically, and politically. Their primary impact suggests that citizens, legislators, administrators, faculty, and students can all benefit, without sacrificing quality, if creative collaborative problem-solving takes precedence over a hierarchically-controlled approach.

The concept of intra-and interorganizational cooperation is not new. Writers and scholars remind us that twenty Greek city states formed an alliance to defeat Persia around 440 B.C.. Winning the battle depended upon the proper combination of 200 Greek ships and on attaining the cooperation of many diverse city states. Today cooperative alliances are being attempted in higher education at an increasing rate for a host of reasons: improving efficiency, enhancing cost savings, providing increased accessibility, and extending the delivery of quality education.

Since its creation in 1977, The University of Houston System (UHS) has provided leadership, coordination, and support for four universities: University of Houston Main Campus (UH), University of Houston–Downtown (UHD), University of Houston–Clear Lake (UHCL), and University of Houston–Victoria (UHV). The four universities provide academic courses, degrees, and activities for over 47,000 students. Three of them, UH, UHD, and UHCL, are located within a 25-mile corridor in the Houston metropolitan area, while UHV is approximately 120 miles from the downtown metro-

politan area. All UHS universities, like other public educational institutions in Texas, have had to cope with a reduction in state-supported resources over the past decade. Resource reductions and the increased demand for new accountability have introduced an interest in encouraging the UHS sister institutions to work together. "Business as usual" is no longer acceptable to Texas legislators, the public, the UHS Board of Regents, the community, and business leaders. The call for access and universal education is emanating throughout the Houston Metropolitan area. UHS universities are the major public institutions charged with satisfying the demand for convenient access and higher education. "Bringing the university to students" is the challenge faced by all four UHS schools. Increased collaboration is an appealing alternative both for expanding access and for conserving resources.

In 1995, the UHS committed itself to a bold new departure in interinstitutional collaboration. The Provost Council representing the four universities developed a plan that resulted in shared programs, faculties, facilities, and technological resources to serve burgeoning higher education needs in Fort Bend County, the second fastest growing area in the nation, on the southwest side of the Houston metropolitan area. The four UHS institutions were joined by two community colleges that agreed to provide lower-division course work to complement the baccalaureate majors and graduate degrees offered. The programs are now delivered through what is designated as a "Multi-Institution Teaching Center" or "MITC."

Prior to the introduction of the MITC, the four UHS sister institutions utilized a traditional hierarchical model of planning, organizing, and controlling. Each of the schools pursued its own goals and agendas, placing an emphasis on controlling their own growth. Figure 1 presents the pre-MITC and post-MITC approaches used by the UHS.

Table 1
UHS Pre- and Post-MITC Approaches Used

Pre-MITC Hierarchical Model	Post-MITC Collaborative Model
Maintains status quo; uses the past as a guiding principle.	Shares goals, rewards, and risks; examines new opportunities.
Pursues the school's goals and agenda with little concern about sister institutions.	Establishes goals with sister institutions; participates fully.
Relies on traditional academic structures, processes, and governance.	Uses cooperative and competitive concept referred to as co-opetition.
Learning occurs within the culture of the school.	Maintains attitude of learning from each other.
Lacks interest in inquiry that pinpoints opportunities.	Balances advocacy of views with interest in others' thinking.
Controls by power and authority.	Emphasizes trust building, working together, and problem-solving.

The MITC initiative in collaborative distance education envisioned from the onset that technology-mediated teaching and learning would be a significant component of program delivery. Interactive television equipment was installed at all four campuses, the Fort Bend Center (the MITC), and the UH System office, and linked by fiber optic cables. Care was taken to make the technology as compatible, complementary, and standardized as possible, given the unique needs of each institution. A UHS program to train faculty members was subsequently undertaken, featuring (and enabling the technicians to debug) multipoint interaction among the four participating institutions.

Co-opetition

Put in perspective, the Fort Bend MITC is a further development in the extensive changes that have overtaken higher education since World War II. For hundreds of thousands of students the traditional campus is no longer the locus of higher education. Pioneered by institutions such as the University of Maryland's University College, taking higher education to the student, rather than vice versa, has become the dominant means of institutional growth; and off-campus delivery is increasingly the arena of interinstitutional competition. Collaboration that does not recognize, respect, and make the most of this reality of underlying competitiveness is unlikely to succeed. The benefits of collaboration must thus be seen in terms of competitive advantage for the participants involved.

The combining of collaboration and competition into one complex, dynamic, and seemingly paradoxical relationship is explored in a book by Adam Brandenburger and Barry Nalebuff, entitled *Co-opetition*. The concept of co-opetition is based on game theory, a term borrowed from Ray Noorda, founder of Novell software, who observed that in business, "You have to compete and cooperate at the same time." Brandenburger and Nalebuff further observe that "Business is cooperation when it comes to creating a pie and competition when it comes to dividing it up."

The four UHS institutions continue to compete for enrollments and resources, but the need for collaboration has created a different mindset and style of interaction. Collaboration in the MITC requires a fundamental shift in relationships, skills, and ways of thinking as illustrated in Figure 1. New skills, mindsets, and organizational designs are, of course, extremely difficult to initiate and maintain in academe. Thus, the leaders of the UHS and of the four institutions have worked hard to develop in common:

- a view of partnering as representing opportunity, rather than loss of control—opportunity to create a bigger pie for all to share;
- a sense of at-stakeness or "skin in" the game on the part of each partner;
- a level of trust and commitment;
- a readiness to learn from each other.

By cooperating in providing a diverse array of academic programs, the institutions have combined their individual strengths, and expanded accessibility to increase total enrollment at the MITC to over 1400 students. By cooperating in providing technology resources and administrative support, they have reduced costs and rendered more efficient the delivery of those programs—compared to what the costs would be in one institution.

Although the UHS institutions confronted and resolved a number of complicated issues—from creating the model of a lead institution and supporting institutions for each program to developing a common application form—participants continue to confront the most complicated and significant issues of all:

- the fragility of collaborative alliances;
- infrastructure support for the delivery of education and learning;
- course and program articulation across the four sister institutions;
- the implications for faculty roles and rewards in an environment of co-opetition.

In particular, the use of interactive technology places new demands on faculty for training time and reconfiguration of courses, and it places new strains on students at a time when collaborative effort is more and more expected in the classroom and workplace.

The MITC carried tremendous political appeal—a no frills approach to creating new sites for the delivery of higher education by tapping the resources of already existing institutions. The complex policy issues surrounding collaboration were, according to this line of reasoning, a small and reasonable price to pay for launching a new educational enterprise without creating expensive executive positions, building a complex administrative support bureaucracy, absorbing major physical plant expenditures, hiring new faculty members, or investing in duplicate programs and underutilized technology. In short, the MITC was able to direct the educational resources of several universities (in our case, four) into an underserved region of the state at a fraction of the cost of creating a new freestanding university from scratch.

The Negotiating Process

In 1996 state policy-makers (Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board members) provided authorization to the UHS MITC to offer thirty degrees, but complex matters still needed to be resolved, especially the creation of the rules of the game. There was a wide range of policy issues that required resolution—rules for creating a MITC, rules for institutional membership, rights of non-MITC partners in the region served, and the determination of the appropriate level of detail for Coordinating Board approval. A number of issues regarding governance, authority, and oversight were also on the table.

The UHS was able to secure quick approval of its MITC proposal, taking advantage of statewide support for the concept and generally shared eagerness that policies governing its operation be promulgated in a timely manner. In addition, the MITC benefited from several other advantages. First, the region to be served, Fort Bend County, was generally perceived as an extension of the greater Houston metropolitan area, and it was therefore logical for the UHS and its institutions to take responsibility for delivering higher education to the county.

The fact that a single system of senior universities launched this initiative was a second reason for the prompt approval of the MITC and one that carried broad operational implications: oversight by a single governing board; a single policy framework; the potential for administrative efficiencies; previously existing cooperative working relationships among the principal academic administrators; a minimum of interinstitu-

tional competition; and enlightened self-interest and optimism that the project would contribute to the future well-being of the system and its universities. In addition, although two community colleges also participate in the MITC, their lower-level offerings complement, rather than compete with, the universities' upper-level and graduate offerings.

Lessons Learned from The MITC

The above by no means reflects an exhaustive analysis of the political context for the creation of the UH System's Fort Bend initiative, it is possible to draw some conclusions regarding lessons learned from it. Despite a change in the leadership of the UHS in 1997, the new administrative team and the already supportive UHS Board of Regents continued to advocate the MITC concept. As noted earlier, a receptive climate among statewide policy-makers is a desirable element—as is strongly signaled, unequivocal support form the top echelon of institutional and system leadership.

Given the authority to collaborate on this bold new venture, each UHS university was then faced with the daunting task of learning how to collaborate in previously untested ways. Technology would play a substantial role in this new construct, both as an opportunity and as a threat, and certainly as an instrument sufficiently powerful to shape the internal rules for collaboration. Implementing the MITC faced political and organizational challenges on each campus, where the game itself was played and its rules both tested and contested.

Tradition and Change

Faculty see being custodians of the curriculum as one of their major roles, responsible for overseeing and protecting the quality of academic programs. Degrees of formality in the actual fulfillment of this role vary from institution to institution, but the bottom line is that faculty do feel strongly about it and guard it with pride and diligence. Their vigilance is reasonably accommodated at the home site, but the prospect of the university's delivering courses leading to the completion of degrees off-campus and in cooperation with other universities, even though they are within the same system, can be less than cordially received by faculty.

Recall that under the concept of "co-opetition," the four institutions collaborated at the same time they remained competitive—especially in guarding the academic standards established on each campus. Of course, each institution's faculty raised and discussed major questions to be assured that the respective courses would be delivered in an appropriate manner and that the quality of the programs would be preserved.

Quality. Faculty are quick to insist that they should be a part of the decision-making process from the beginning, so that they can fulfill their responsibilities to their programs, continue to serve in their perceived roles, and protect their position and status. The scheduling of courses to be taught and the selection of faculty to teach them are among the most critical decisions for an academic department. Careful consideration of the ratio and balance of full-time and part-time teachers for both day and night classes is a significant element in the development of the schedule in order to provide the desired faculty coverage for upper division and graduate level courses. Scheduling takes on an even more important role when the academic department involved is accredited by an external agency such as AACSB, ABET, or others with "balance" expectations and required standards.

The problem of scheduling with respect to quality and balanced faculty coverage is greatly exacerbated with the introduction of an off-campus site, whether the department is responsible for the delivery of all or part of the courses leading to a degree. Deans, department chairs, and faculty are now faced with the challenge of providing the same quality of delivery and balanced coverage at two locations in what becomes a formidable planning matrix. The use of interactive TV with its scheduling constraints, technical dependency, and unreliability increases the variables and the stress level.

When one of the collaborating UHS universities accepts the role of "lead" campus for a given degree, the complexity expands and attains even greater depth and breadth. The lead campus awards the degree, ensures the quality of the program, and performs related administrative functions. Faculty and administrators of the lead university must provide the same content, quality, and balance of coverage for a larger number of courses, and these must be provided in a logical sequence at both locations to allow students to progress toward the completion of their degrees. Further, the lead university must coordinate not only its own offerings, on and off campus, but also the supporting courses from other universities.

The necessity for hiring qualified part-time faculty (adjuncts) reaches a new level of importance in this last scenario. Identification and hiring of appropriately credentialed adjuncts, already complicated and time-consuming, becomes more so when a second location is miles away from the home institution. Thus, the regular faculty's role now expands to one of assisting with the orientation of adjuncts in two locations, which may involve sharing syllabi, providing information on relevant university policies, and ascertaining whether adjuncts are aware of the university's expectations for their performance.

Some of the full-time faculty will remain at the home base, but others will teach a part of their load at the secondary site. This prospect creates a high level of concern for faculty as they contemplate changes that will occur in their teaching lives, as well as the overall effect that such changes may have on department processes such as committee assignments, governance, and mentoring students. As previously stated, a relatively simple future gives way to one complicated by largely unknown variables, and the direction of their journey appears to stray unpredictably from its beginning. These newly emerging demands are not something most faculty are asked to consider during the hiring process.

Another quality concern expressed by faculty in the co-opetition atmosphere involved the articulation of course equivalencies across the UHS campuses. For example, although the psychology professors working on the delivery of MITC-courses collaborated, there were conflicting opinions and standards. Does a UH psychology course meet the quality standards of a UH Clear Lake psychology course? Articulating courses proved to be a delicate task that was repeated time and time again across the UHS institutions. In some cases courses were articulated, and in other cases resistance, usually based on different standards or views of quality, prevailed.

Student and Faculty Services. The university obviously must be concerned about the services that should be provided for faculty and students at a secondary teaching site. The need for answering student questions about services and activities outside the

classroom may require a new learning curve for faculty, because the same support offices may not be available at the MITC site as at the home campus, and the processes and procedures for dealing with student needs may thus be different.

The university must attend to off-campus admission, advising, registration, and payment processes. In addition, students need to be able to purchase books and other resources on site and have the availability of library and computer facilities. As decisions are made about how these services will be provided, faculty must be kept in the information loop so that they are in a position to inform the students. More important, they need to be a part of the process for determining on-site library holdings and for accessing the home campus library in order to make assignments. Planning for and sharing information about computer hardware and software availability are important, if faculty are to determine whether their needs will be met for classroom work and outside assignments. Thus the role of the faculty changes again, because they must now assume a larger role in the overall daily activities of the site where their teaching is to take place.

Governance and Collegiality. Shared governance is sorely tested when faculty and administrators must grapple with making things work for faculty teaching at the off-campus Fort Bend MITC site. Faculty, and traditionally students, operate under the policies of the respective campus offering the course(s). However, students taking courses at more than one campus necessarily fall under the policies of more than one campus. How do faculty deal with this new reality? Is, for instance, a case of academic dishonesty the purview of the institution offering the course or the one granting the degree?

Tenured faculty have expressed concern about the progress of probationary (non-tenured) faculty teaching at the second site. Annual faculty performance evaluations become important documents when faculty are considered for tenure. Tenured faculty are concerned that time spent at the second site by probationary faculty is time away from research, necessary committee work, and other types of service activities. They are also concerned about student evaluations at the other site and about the impact on everyday interactions that they expect to have with faculty. Another concern is that the time spent in traveling to and from the distant site may decrease the valuable time needed for scholarly endeavors.

Technology. Each of the four UHS universities realized that the collaborative approach that incorporated technology was a viable method for delivering instruction. Interactive television courses are touted as a way for one teacher to deliver instruction at the home campus while teaching the course at the same time to another group at a second site. However, this type of instruction requires a change in preparation and in delivery style for most faculty, some of whom may embrace the challenge of learning a new way to do things while others resist vigorously.

Technology-mediated instruction raises the issue of quality and the added value of real face-to-face interaction with students. The university must be prepared to provide training and support for faculty who are willing and able to master interactive TV delivery and other modes of electronic delivery. Notably, all four UH System institutions have joined forces to provide the necessary training, as well as enhanced techni-

cal support. One lesson learned is that the equipment alone, without a commensurate investment in support staff and user training, becomes at best an underutilized resource and at worst, expensive and unattractive furniture.

Compensation. Compensation for training or release time for preparation and/or training has become another issue that must be addressed. Channel television, e-mail, and videotape courses add to the ways distance instruction can be and is being delivered. In fact, the UHS owns and operates both public television and public radio stations and has for decades broadcast selected courses. All of these modes of delivery pose questions of both quality and compensation. In addition to issues over the added demands of travel and training time, questions arise about compensation for the development and use of intellectual property. When faculty from four universities are teaching in the same building, respective university decisions about compensation inevitably become topics of conversation, and differential treatment among faculty for the same types of tasks can become a very controversial and divisive issue.

A Framework for Institutions
Considering Collaborative Alliances

Although alliances, cooperatives, and joint ventures have existed for years in business, they remain relatively misunderstood. Empirical analyses of MITC-type projects in higher education institutions are rare. Thus, some lessons from empirically-based business organization research were useful in improving UHS institutions' knowledge about collaborative alliances.

Interestingly, the business research indicates that an overwhelming concern among alliances partners is the perceived loss of control. Why does loss of control arouse such a powerful concern? There is no simple answer, but a few suggested actions seem appropriate to deal with its potentially destructive influence.

- In forming MITC-type arrangements, there needs to be a thorough conceptual understanding of the architecture—who reports to whom, the range of authority and responsibility must be spelled out, and how communication flows is important.
- The institutions entering into the collaborative alliance (four universities in the MITC) must hold a mature level of understanding and expectations.
- The leadership must be familiar with the resources it will require to make the collaborative alliance effective: people, space, equipment, funding.
- The collaborative alliance team must have a clear understanding of the results they expect, along with a method of measuring those results on a continuous basis.

These four actions form the framework for developing a strategy among higher education institutions entering collaborative arrangements such as the MITC.

The criteria that served fundamental requirements to initiate the MITC included the following:

- achieve specific strategic goals involving providing education to new learners in an off-campus setting;
- effectively leverage already limited resources;
- maintain quality of education;
- use the leadership provided by the UHS Provosts Council to maintain interest in achieving win-win negotiations.

If the MITC failed to meet any of these four criteria, it would not have been possible to initiate or maintain the project. Overriding the accomplishment of the four criteria is the fact that each of the four universities has a vested interest in each other's future. The future growth and stature of the UHS and its universities is ultimately connected to each of the sister institutions. Providing affordable, high quality, and meaningful educational programs to the Houston metropolitan area (which presently has a population of four million and is projected to have a population of over 6.5 million by 2012) rests with the UHS institutions. The UHS Board of Regents and the UHS's administrative team has stressed these points again and again in speeches, meetings, and reports.

The Importance of Trust

Chemistry among partners is seldom given its due position as an essential component in the development of effective collaborative alliances. Chemistry defines and describes the quality of the relationship among the UHS administration and the four institutions. Although intangible, it's an essential glue that holds the collaborative unit, the MITC, together.

What exactly is the chemistry of the UHS MITC? First, there are some desirable components that are evolving and taking shape. Included are such components as:

- Trusting in UHS and among the participating institutions;
- Knowing that the partners will live up to the unwritten terms of the agreements;
- Doing what you say you will do;
- Committing to a win/win strategy;
- Creatively solving problems that were anticipated or that occur.

These components may sound simplistic and in some regards they are. However, they are built on values that have been respected for centuries.

Although chemistry can't be precisely measured, it can be sensed in the discussions, debates, activities, and results. It was a responsibility of the UHS Provosts Council to work in harmony in a way that resulted in the kind of component principles listed above. The MITC required that individuals with a commitment to making it work take the lead. In the case of the UHS MITC the Provosts Council served as the initial champions.

In initiating and operating the MITC, the one most significant element was the establishment of trust. The "optimal chemistry" is trust: trust within the UHS and among the participants in the development and operation of the MITC. Trust in terms of the MITC is the belief that those on whom we (the partners) depend will meet our expectations. Achieving this level of trust requires effort, attention, and learning.

The UHS Provosts Council learned the importance of trust over a short period of time. An increasing level of trust allowed members to say what was on their minds regarding the MITC, and a sufficient level of trust permitted direct and honest communication. The openness also resulted in better and more timely decision-making. The improved trust on the UH Provosts Council did not guarantee the success of the MITC, but it permitted discussions of each institution's fears, liabilities, and problems.

The key imperatives in building trust and the evolving chemistry are integrity, concern for the other person's situation, and achieving results. It would be incorrect to claim that even after working together on formulating and implementing the MITC, complete trust exists on the UHS Provosts Council. For example, the articulation of course equivalencies still remains a sticky problem. The importance of reciprocity across institutions should not be underestimated in MITC–type arrangement. However, it is accurate to claim that by working on the MITC, a higher level of trust than ever experienced before among the UHS and the four institutions now exists.

The Ongoing Management of the MITC

The management of the MITC has been frustrating, challenging, and demanding. Coordination has become a rule; diplomacy is a necessity; and the internal campus politics have been perplexing at times. Once the MITC was initiated, responsibility for success shifted from the originators of the idea, to the champions, and eventually to the campus liaisons such as deans, department chairs, or dean-appointees. As everyone in the responsibility line soon found out, managing the MITC required a new and different set of skills and control systems. It was also determined that differences among the partners' (universities') strengths, goals, and styles created conflicts as well as opportunities.

The value of co-opetition rests on the premise that both cooperation and competition are needed. Acquiring a sense of flexibility so that cooperation and competition can both flourish is what the UHS institutions are attempting to achieve. The capability of being flexible enough to seize opportunities that are beyond the resource base of any of the UHS institutions requires vision and the activities of "champions."

The UHS Provosts Council has been involved in the formulation, implementation, and integration roles over the course of three years. For example, the initial integration roles performed by the UHS Provosts Council included leadership, role clarification, establishment of policies, fostering consensus decision making, making some initial resource commitments, and providing liaison between the academic units/representatives. There is no substitute for leadership in the MITC. The breaking down of traditional academic and institutional barriers was extremely important. The MITC increased interactions among the UHS institutions, experimentation with policy initiatives that are then transferred back to the other campuses, and an improved understanding about the roles of each campus in this UHS mission and its goals.

The initial success of the MITC in the geographical area has resulted in legislative action. For example, in 1998 the Sugar Land City Council voted to approve $3.5 funding for the UHS MITC in Fort Bend. This vote of support for the MITC is a reflection of the confidence and interest residents in the area have in the UHS. In addition, the state of Texas transferred 248 acres in Fort Bend County to the UHS. The MITC will enable area residents to have access to the highest quality post-secondary education provided by each of the four schools.

Conclusion

Over a century ago Charles Darwin proposed that the survival of all species on this planet can be described as survival of the fittest. Today some have distorted Darwin's proposition and interpret it to mean "survival of the strongest." But the tenor of his original message was that the survival of the species was a direct result of its ability to properly adapt to its environment. The Greek city state had to adapt by forming an alliance to defeat the Persians. The same is true of organizations such as the University of Houston System and its four universities. Their success, growth, and impact are directly dependent on their ability to identify, anticipate, and respond to changes in the higher education environment of Texas and the Houston metropolitan region, and indeed, the world. The MITC is an attempt by the UHS to adapt, redesign, and institutionalize a productive collaborative arrangement. Only through collaborative mind-sets can UHS institutions deal effectively with changes in the environment it faces.

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We are universities, public and private, whose mission includes teaching, research, and professional service. We offer both graduate and undergraduate education in the liberal arts and two or more professional fields. The latter programs are strongly practice-oriented and make extensive use of clinical sites in the metropolitan area.

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