

SPECIAL FEATURES / CONTRIBUTIONS SPÉCIALES

Consortia in Postsecondary Education

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ABSTRACT

This article presents the concept of consortia as formal collaborative arrangements between institutions, which are designed to enhance academic programs or other services provided. Forty years of experience in the United States are reviewed through the literature, and a synopsis of consortia in Canada is presented.

From this review, some "pros and cons" of consortia are raised. Advantages include: reducing duplication, improving quality, increasing program diversity, increasing accessibility, financial advancement, improving communication and more effective planning and control. Cautions raised include: lack of trust, unequal commitment by members, undue emphasis on reducing costs, lack of clear expectations, mismatching membership and mission and irrelevant structure and theory.

The authors conclude that the promise of consortia is such that more detailed study of Canadian consortia is warranted.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article présente le concept de consortiums comme étant des arrangements de collaborations formelles entre institutions. Les consortiums veulent améliorer les programmes académiques ou tout autres services. L'expérience de quarante années aux Etats-Unis est présentée en survol et un sommaire des consortiums au Canada est offert.

A partir de ce survol de la recherche les avantages et les inconvénients des consortiums sont donnés. Parmi les avantages on retrouve les suivants: réduire le dédoublement, améliorer la qualité, augmenter la variété de programmes, augmenter la facilité d'accès, améliorer la communication, minimiser les dépenses, et permettre une planification et un contrôle plus efficaces. Les dangers suivants sont retenus: manque de confiance, engagements inégaux parmi les

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participants, trop grande insistance sur la réduction des coûts, manque d'attentes claires, conflits de personnalités et de buts, structure et théorie non pertinentes.

La conclusion des auteurs est que la promesse offerte par les consortiums exige des études plus approfondies dans un contexte canadien.

Introduction

Until recently, postsecondary education has been characterized by institutional autonomy and academic freedom. During the past two decades, institutional cooperation has achieved prominence in various sectors of postsecondary education. In the face of stabilizing enrolments, economic inflation, fiscal constraints, and mounting political pressures, new governance arrangements have emerged. Consortia are among these cooperative organizational arrangements between two or more institutions, designed to enhance the achievement of institutional goals. Consortia have proven to be an effective means of formalizing working arrangements between institutions, particularly in the United States over the past 40 years, and more recently in Canada.

This article reviews the American experience and provides an overview of postsecondary consortia in Canada from information derived by a national survey. From this information, the prospects for consortia in Canada and their potential contribution to the advancement of higher education are assessed.

The Concept of Consortia

Moore (1968:175) defines a postsecondary consortium as,

...an arrangement whereby two or more institutions – at least one of which is an institution of higher education – agree to pursue between, or among them, a program for strengthening academic programs, improving administration, or providing for other special needs.

Structurally, a consortium is characterized by: a voluntary formal organization; two or more member institutions; multi-academic programs; at least one professional administrator; and an annual contribution or other tangible evidence of long-term commitment of members (Patterson, 1977).

The primary purpose of academic consortia is to strengthen educational offerings by more effectively allocating money, staff and facilities. There is also an important element of enlightened self-interest behind the creation of any consortium. Martin (1981) emphasizes that if the chief purpose of a consortium is anything other than “to serve members’ needs,” the consortium is doomed to fail through misunderstandings and misguided priorities.

The American Experience

Emergence. The concept of formal federations of educational agencies is not a new idea. Patterson (1974:5,6) notes that in 1925 a plan, modelled after Oxford University, established a group of colleges around Pomona, California with a

library and other facilities which they might use in common. Known as the Claremont Graduate School, this was the first such arrangement in the United States.

Between 1925 and 1945, nineteen consortia were established, four more by 1948, another five by 1958, and an additional ten by 1965. In the next five years, thirty-two additional consortia were established. By 1977, Patterson (1977) identified 115 cooperative arrangements, involving 1,398 member institutions.

The impetus for rapid increase in the number of consortia came, in part, from the United States Federal Government. In 1963, the Higher Education Facilities Act was passed in order to provide legislated assistance to educational cooperation. The Higher Education Act of 1965 provided grants for the express purpose of effectively stimulating cooperation among postsecondary educational institutions. Partee-Scott (1979:80) notes:

One of the requisites of federal regulation of Title III ... of the Higher Education Act of 1965 was that participating institutions engage in cooperative efforts with other colleges and universities as well as businesses and industry in order to draw additional resources from these sources.

Structure. Academic consortia have taken a wide variety of forms. Each has adapted itself to its particular set of circumstances, and no single prototype has emerged as the "one best way." However, it is possible to group consortia into four categories, as suggested and described by Martin (1981):

1. Homogeneous institutions serving a specific purpose;
2. Heterogeneous institutions serving a specific purpose;
3. Homogeneous institutions serving a general purpose;
4. Heterogeneous institutions serving a general purpose;

The *homogeneous special purpose consortium* is organized by similar institutions to serve one specific need or purpose, such as operating a research facility too expensive for any one partner to maintain. An example is the Marine Science Consortium in Pennsylvania, which, with thirteen member institutions, operates two cooperative marine stations.

Heterogeneous special purpose consortia are made up of a mixture of unlike institutions which cooperate to provide one special service or serve one particular need. The mixture of institutions in a single consortium may include government or private agencies, universities, colleges – public or private, and others. An example is the Pacific Northwest International/Intercultural Education Consortium which has a variety of members in three states and Canada. Together these institutions provide opportunities for faculty and students to study abroad in a variety of programs.

The *homogeneous general purpose consortium* is one in which similar institutions cooperate to provide a wide range of services and to share each other's strengths. This type of consortium is found among small liberal arts colleges as well as among major universities. An example of the former is the Five Colleges Incorporated of New Hampshire that has joint programs, services, faculty, and departments. An example of the latter is the Committee on Institutional

Cooperation in which the “Big Ten” universities and the University of Chicago cooperate.

A heterogeneous general purpose consortium is one in which a mixture of dissimilar institutions and agencies – often in close physical proximity – cooperate to provide a wide range of services and programs to their clientele. An example is the Dayton-Miami Valley Consortium which includes private and public colleges in the metropolitan area of Dayton, Ohio.

The special purpose consortia do not involve a major portion of the faculty in any of their member institutions. These consortia relate to only *one* portion or department, existing on the periphery of the institutions and making little impact upon them. However, in general purpose consortia, the commitment to cooperation penetrates more deeply into the central functions of their members than is so for special purpose consortia. The total institution is more likely to participate, or at least be affected by consortium membership, and therefore the impact of membership is quite substantial.

Membership. Membership in a consortium is, by definition, *voluntary*. Hence, those institutional arrangements which are designed *a priori*, or legislated into existence, do not qualify as true consortia.

The number of members in a consortium may vary widely – from two or three members to over forty. While there exists no theoretical ideal, size often depends on the purpose, geographic location, and other circumstances. Franklin Patterson (1974:12) comments on the size of consortia:

... my own sense is that it is difficult indeed for a cooperative effort to be very successful with more than seven or eight member institutions. Cooperative effort involving an institution intensely will by its very nature involve conflict and compromise, and the larger the number of institutions involved, the more diluted (or disputed) the eventual product is likely to be. Where a consortium exists to provide service to member institutions, bigness appears to lead to fragmentation among members.

Member institutions must give some evidence of a long-term commitment to the consortium. Usually, this takes the form of a written agreement. In some cases, this agreement is not fully acted upon, but serves as a public declaration of the willingness of institutional members to cooperate.

Where a membership fee is required, it may be as little as three hundred dollars a year, or as high as forty thousand, depending on the program. In cases where grants have been received from government or private foundations, membership fees may be reduced or eliminated entirely.

Institutions may be required to designate office space, staff time, or other services as a condition of membership. Often the commitments required relate directly to the funding base and relative wealth of an institution.

Governance and leadership. The policy and decision-making functions in a consortium are usually accomplished by a board of directors, drawn from each member institution. A full-time officer who reports to the board usually carries out the management of the consortium. Although this is the basic governance model, some variations exist.

In special-purpose consortia, the president may designate a department chairman, or another representative, to attend board meetings, reserving the right to be consulted in major decisions. In some cases, especially where the membership is large, an executive committee may make operational decisions, referring only major policy decisions to the board.

Some of the general-purpose consortia have expanded the governance structure even further. In some instances the executive director's office and staff are in a location away from an institutional campus, with assistant directors appointed from academic faculty to serve as consortium representatives on each campus. Such an arrangement increases the visibility of the consortium, and improves communication among member institutions.

The executive director of the consortium answers to the board of directors. His tasks may include planning, organizing, budgeting, consulting with administrators and faculty members, convening meetings, arranging for the use of facilities and equipment, submitting annual reports, and acting as a liaison with external agencies.

Glass and Allen (1979) indicate the importance of providing adequate leadership for consortia. They argue that the executive director should be a full-time professional with key responsibilities to facilitate communication among member institutions, and to act as a catalyst to speed up the decision-making process of the consortium.

Consortia in Canada

Although the use of the specific term "consortium" has been quite rare in Canada until recently, the concept of institutional collaboration for the purpose of providing service is well established. For example, the development of "university families," such as the University of Toronto in Ontario, dates back to the nineteenth century. According to Harris (1976:221):

The Federation Act of 1887 re-established the University of Toronto and ... provided a satisfactory university connection for theological colleges ... for professional schools such as those that had been established by the dental and pharmacy professions and for the engineering and agricultural colleges which the government itself had established.

Similar arrangements have been made in the West, for example at the University of Manitoba. The federation of institutions may be viewed as an arrangement different from a consortium. In a federation, institutions retain their identity but become totally submerged in the larger organization. Consortia are definitively circumscribed entities with identities separate from the institutions that constitute their membership.

In recent years, new types of consortia arrangements have evolved throughout Canada, incorporating new programs as well as new methods of teaching and learning.

In Alberta, since 1975, the consortium approach has been used by postsecondary institutions to deliver programs to inmates of correctional institutions. The first

such arrangement was initiated in the Peace River Correction Institution, and as a result of a favorable evaluation (Boutillier, 1976), the consortium approach was introduced in the Calgary and Fort Saskatchewan institutions. By 1980, eight institutions were involved in the Calgary consortium and six in Fort Saskatchewan (Seger et al., 1981)

Drawing on the successful experience of providing inmate education through consortia, the Government of Alberta supported the creation of five postsecondary consortia to serve residents in centres not within the primary service area of an existing public college. Best described as heterogeneous general purpose consortia, each with a college, university and technical institute member, these consortia bring the equivalent of full-time programs to residents in their service communities (Pickard, 1981). Each consortium has a board of directors comprised of institutional chief executive officers or their designees. A consortium coordinator acts as director, and one member institution serves as agent for legal and administrative purposes. An advisory committee, appointed locally, provides community input on program needs. Administrative and program grants are provided by the provincial government.

Apart from the Alberta situation which has been studied in detail (Konrad & Small 1982, Small, 1983 a.b.c., Small & Mitchell 1983), not much attention has been paid to postsecondary consortia in Canada. In order to illuminate the current state of affairs, a survey was undertaken in 1984 through a two-stage process. First, a letter was sent to every university vice-president (academic) in Canada, to the director of all provincial government agencies or commissions for higher education and to selected college presidents requesting their help in identifying postsecondary consortia in their respective jurisdictions. For this purpose, a consortium was defined as follows:

an on-going arrangement whereby two or more institutions agree to pursue between, or among them, a program for strengthening the delivery of academic programs, improving administration, or providing for other special needs.

Through this process, 53 responses identified contact persons associated with 96 organizations that had some of the qualities of a consortium. Ninety-six questionnaires were distributed in stage two and 53 completed questionnaires returned, representing a response rate of 55 percent.

An examination of the completed questionnaires revealed that there is a wide range of cooperative arrangements among postsecondary educational institutions in Canada, but only 25 of these could be considered postsecondary consortia in the fullest sense of the term.

Establishment. One of the earliest consortia identified in the study was the Association of Atlantic Universities (1964). In the period 1968 to 1974 ten more consortia were established, and between 1980 and 1983 seven consortia were formed. The overall distribution of consortia identified by this survey covered the country with the exception of Saskatchewan. Ontario had eight; Alberta and B.C. each had six; Quebec three; Manitoba one, and the Atlantic provinces one.

The main concern which led to the establishment of Canadian postsecondary consortia was the need for cooperative planning as a means to more effective and efficient utilization of resources. This was a factor in the case of seventeen consortia. In four cases, joint use of facilities was the main concern.

In the majority of cases, provincial governments played a prominent role in the establishment of the consortia, either as catalyst, primary initiator or equal partner. However, in ten instances there was no direct government involvement. Most consortia received government support, eight receiving 90 percent or more of their operating budgets from this source. However, nine consortia received no government assistance, and these generally were the consortia not initiated by government.

The official goals of the consortia arose from the initial concerns which led to their creation. Cooperative planning was listed as a dominant goal, as were joint programming and dissemination of information. Research and joint use of facilities were listed as the official goals of four consortia.

Membership and clientele. Consortium membership and the clientele served were functions of the consortium's purpose. Fifteen consortia were homogeneous in nature; that is, they consisted of similar institutions, either colleges or universities. The others were heterogeneous, including both colleges and universities, and in some cases non-postsecondary agencies, in their membership. The best examples of heterogeneous consortia were the Alberta postsecondary consortia.

Consortia which listed their main goal as joint programming identified students as their primary clientele. Those which emphasized cooperative planning, information dissemination, research or joint use of facilities identified the institutions or faculty within them as the main beneficiaries. Several consortia mentioned government, business and industry as clientele. These were mainly the research consortia.

Resources. The financial and human resources of consortia varied widely. Tri-University Meson Facility had a budget of \$25.8 million and involved 70 professional staff and 298 support staff, while at the other extreme one consortium had a budget of \$2000. The federal government provided the major share of capital funds for the Meson Facility during the construction phase. The British Columbia and Alberta governments also made annual contributions during the construction phase through the universities. Currently, the operating budget came entirely from the Federal Government via the National Research Council of Canada.

Some respondents in reporting the consortium's budget and staff, included the resources of the member organizations while others reported only the resources of the consortium. This made it difficult to arrive at a conclusion regarding financial resources other than to report that the consortia that offered programs had fewer funds than those involved in research, providing services or facilities to members. Most consortia had less than nine professional staff and five support staff.

More than half of the consortia received some financial support by way of a special government grant. The major financial support, other than government

grants, included contributions of member organizations, research contracts, student fees and publications.

Most of the consortia occupied premises located within a member institution.

Organization. In the majority of consortia, the policy-making body was a formal board of trustees; in the remainder, it was a less formal committee of executives of member organizations. The director or the staff of the consortium in most cases was responsible for policy implementation. Three consortia had given the responsibility for policy implementation to the chairman of the board or committee. The five Alberta postsecondary consortia appointed one member institution to act as agent for formal transactions.

Most consortia used meetings as the principal means of communication with mail, telephone, computers and visits playing a supportive role.

Prospects. In response to specific questions addressing the reasons for the creation of Canadian consortia, high or very high importance was attached to the following benefits by more than two-thirds of the respondents:

1. The consortium enables an institution to provide an improved service.
2. Membership in a consortium allows a service to be provided that one institution could not provide alone.

Opinion was divided on other benefits, probably reflecting the purpose for the establishment of the consortium significantly. Sixty percent of the consortia anticipated that they would increase their activities, twenty percent expected to maintain their present level of activities, and a further twenty percent expected a decrease in their activities.

The reasons provided by the consortia for anticipating increased activity were increased demand for their program or increased funding. All who anticipated a decline in their activities were from British Columbia and attributed the decline to funding constraints.

The Potential of Consortia

In the face of stabilizing enrolments, economic inflation, fiscal constraints, and mounting political pressures, consortia arrangements appear to provide a wide range of benefits for postsecondary institutions. In this section, a series of benefits identified in the literature (Toppe and Brubaker, 1978; Patterson, 1979 a; Rowell, 1975), and illustrated from the Canadian survey are presented.

1. Consortia can reduce costly and unnecessary duplication. Providing services by pooling resources rather than by meeting perceived needs individually, offers a much more efficient use of resources. In the past, when financial resources were readily available for colleges and universities, the usual solution to meet identified needs was to create new initiatives, regardless of existing services offered by other institutions.

The Postsecondary Institutional Research Committee of British Columbia maintains an enrolment data base, conducts student profile studies, and coordinates data analyses for system management and planning for colleges,

universities and government departments. A cooperative approach offers a more efficient alternative, reducing duplicative services.

2. Institutions can strengthen the quality of their offerings and services through cooperation. Joint sponsorship of programs, cross-registration of students, and sharing of library resources, for example, can expand and enrich educational opportunities and services. By creating better options for students, the quality of their educational experiences can be improved.

A good example of a consortium designed specifically to improve quality is TRIUMF (Tri-University Meson Facility), with a membership of the three universities of British Columbia and the University of Alberta. TRIUMF provides a world class facility to carry out nuclear research at the highest levels of international excellence.

3. Consortia can increase curricular, faculty, and student services offered in postsecondary education. Consortia arrangements can add a breadth of experience for students that would otherwise be denied by providing a support base for new or marginal programs.

Two cooperative arrangements in Ontario illustrate increased diversity through consortia. The Trent-Queen's Concurrent Program provides a viable alternative form of teacher education in cooperation with the Peterborough County and Separate school boards. Similarly, the University of Toronto-York University Joint Program in Transportation serves as a unique source of information, research base, and instructional centre in the transportation field.

4. Consortia arrangements increase access to higher education for a variety of students. Geographically isolated or place-bound students can be served by cooperative outreach programs and new learning centres. The five Alberta postsecondary consortia were created specifically to provide credit programs in geographical areas beyond the major service regions of existing colleges. Some students, for example, adults, minorities, women, handicapped and economically disadvantaged, not adequately served by individual colleges and universities in the past, have in the last decade been served more adequately through such consortia arrangements.
5. Consortia contribute to the financial advancement of member institutions. Cooperative arrangements have made it possible for member institutions to obtain grants that otherwise they might not have received. Institutions can often make a case for financial support collectively that they could not make individually. Such benefits may accrue to colleges and universities within a particular geographic region, as well as to institutions spread across a country that cooperate in pursuing a common purpose.

A good example of achieving financial advancement through a cooperative endeavor is in the Ottawa Carleton Research Institute. The Institute receives substantial funding from both government and industry to pursue research related to industry.

6. The process of planning, establishing, and operating a consortium opens up new and creative channels of communication among postsecondary institu-

tions. The opportunity for open dialogue among colleagues in a network of different institutions develops a new perspective on teaching and learning. Likewise, the need for more effective communication with community agencies is often more clearly seen by members of a consortium than by institutions operating independently in the same service region.

The Education Information Centre, with full membership of nine institutions in the greater Vancouver area and several associate members beyond this region, provides the public with increased information about programs and services offered by participating institutions.

7. Consortia provide a vehicle for effective planning and control in postsecondary education. Interinstitutional cooperation makes it possible for participating institutions to control their destiny much more effectively by virtue of the strength which collective action brings. Cooperation acts as a counter force to arbitrary rulings by a senior authority, such as a department of government or a coordinating agency.

The Alberta consortia provide a structure through which leadership can emerge and be shared at community and regional levels. Leadership may come from one or more institutions or from the public at large, but it is enhanced through consortia arrangements. Success in consortia always appears to be associated with strong leadership that helps member institutions work toward a common goal.

Some Problems in Consortia

This paper suggests that consortia will have an increasing role to play in postsecondary education in Canada. While the survey did not enquire into problems arising in consortia, it would be inappropriate to assume that there are none. In fact, a series of inherent problems identified through the American experience (Scott, 1977; Martin, 1981; Fox, 1978; Grupe, 1978; and Nelson, 1978) should be kept in mind by those involved in consortia arrangements.

1. There is a potential lack of trust among consortium members. Autonomy is one of the substantial assumptions held by postsecondary educational institutions. When autonomous institutions form a consortium, for whatever purposes, it is natural for representatives of these autonomous institutions to be suspicious of each other. Representatives of one institution, for example, might suspect that other institutions could gain greater benefits from joining the consortium than they themselves would. Very few institutions acknowledge such suspicions, or examine them to assess whether they can be overcome in order to engage more effectively in collaborative work.
2. Consortia may be weakened by an unequal commitment among members. It is obvious that an effective consortium requires equity in the commitment of each member institution. In other words, institutions joining a consortium must perceive an equitable commitment among institutions to the goals and projects designed. Unfortunately, when some institutions find they have little interest in

the consortium goals, they may not be honest enough to withdraw from cooperative activities. Consequently, these institutions place themselves in the position of having to devote time and resources to goals they do not consider important. They sometimes pay a bitter and enervating price for involvement in such projects.

3. Too frequently a consortium is hailed as a method of financial rescue for its members. But a consortium, being entirely voluntary, is sometimes too fragile to withstand the political pressure generated by cost-efficiency principles. For example, a consortium may be a valuable tool in cushioning the effects of retrenchment, but it is not effective as a method for balancing institutional budgets. If an institution cannot control its own costs, the consortium arrangement will offer little help. An undue emphasis on reducing costs may arouse faculty opposition to interinstitutional efforts. It also guarantees skeptical responses from administrators who anticipate that the additional expenses of a formal consortium may exceed any cost efficiencies achieved in the institutional arrangements.
4. It is evident that a number of consortia do not formulate clear and appropriate expectations in their written agreements. This is possibly the greatest hazard faced by consortia.

Since a consortium is established as a cooperative venture of autonomous institutions, its founding principles must be exceptionally clear to all of its members. To be effective, these principles must have higher priorities than the assertion that cooperation is intrinsically valuable, the possibility that a granting agency will support the project, or the expectation that money might be saved through interinstitutional cooperation. Careful consideration of what principles unite the members and what objectives might reasonably be pursued jointly is essential.

5. Occasionally consortia arrangements fail because of mismatched membership. A major reason for a mismatch among institutions is that consortia memberships are often based on geographic proximity. The notion that neighboring colleges and universities make good partners is not always correct. Another source of discord lies in the diversity of purposes and statuses among member institutions, frequently resulting in cultural distances and institutional rivalries which can consume large amounts of emotional energy and severely handicap cooperative ventures.
6. The structure, philosophy and operations of consortia are inimical to most institutional management principles. Bureaucratic principles seem particularly out of place in the management of consortia. For example, rationality of differentiated roles, hierarchical distribution of authority, and standardized procedures are of little value in understanding these interacting organizations in which processes are usually of greater importance than structures.

How useful is it to speak of span of control when a consortium employs one executive officer to oversee a number of committees, none of which has representatives with a definite responsibility? Yet while processes are important,

products are imperative. And improved products are unlikely to emerge until the unique nature and characteristics of consortia are recognized, and new principles based on interorganizational analysis are identified and applied. Such developments can only occur through a systematic study of consortia in action.

Conclusion

The consortium movement in United States postsecondary education over the past 40 years has been well documented. Institutional cooperation in Canada, though widespread, has not been documented to the same extent, and the use of the term "consortium" is relatively recent. The survey reported in this paper should only be seen as an initial attempt to identify Canadian consortia. Indeed, it is quite apparent that a wide range of perspectives on consortia exists in Canada, and that some cooperative arrangements among postsecondary institutions fall short of the commitments made by members of an ongoing organization – a consortium. It is readily acknowledged that a more thorough inquiry of consortia in Canadian postsecondary education could reveal substantially more information about these cooperative ongoing arrangements.

The American literature generally reports positively on consortia in that country; in most parts of Canada, cooperative arrangements hold potential for improving postsecondary educational services.

Evidence from the Canadian survey suggests that traditional governance assumptions and principles of administration may not necessarily apply to consortia. By studying the operation of consortia more systematically, new governance principles may be enunciated in the future.

Consortia may provide one means of maintaining vitality in our postsecondary educational institutions in the challenging years ahead.

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