

Successful Inter-institutional Resource Sharing in a Niche Educational Market: Formal Collaboration Without a Contract

Elizabeth H. Dow

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Abstract Funded by an Institute for Museum and Library Services National Leadership grant, five universities developed a system to provide archives education courses—a niche curriculum—to each other. They use compressed video over Internet 2 in a resource-sharing collaboration across five states and two time zones. The original grant ran from 2002–2005, during which time the collaborative offered eight courses to 140 students. Between 2006 and 2008, it offered eleven courses to 177 students. This article details the administrative model, based solely on school- and department-level agreements, which have enabled this resource-sharing collaborative to thrive after grant support ceased. While developed for archives education programs, the model could enhance any niche curriculum program.

Key words resource sharing · administration · distance education · collaboration · higher education

Allan Hayduk (1994) explored the concept of niche curriculum markets in campus-based education. Among other factors which create niches, he recognized “the small institution which is unable to offer senior-level or specialized courses because specialized teachers are unavailable or because they must be directed to more pressing, larger enrolment courses.” He then suggested that “distance education...is ideal for meeting curricular-niche market needs.”(p. 44) While he focused on undergraduate education, his observations apply to graduate education as well. This article describes the administrative structure of a successful strategic alliance among five universities which use distance education technology to support archives education—a niche curriculum market in graduate education. While developed for archives education, the model lends itself to other niche curriculum programs very readily.

Elizabeth H. Dow holds an M.A. in history from the University of Vermont and a Ph.D. in Library Science from the University of Pittsburgh. She teaches the archives track in the School of Library and Information Science at Louisiana State University and specializes in description of archival materials and intellectual access to electronically published historical documents.

E. H. Dow (✉)
Louisiana State University, School of Library and Information Science, 267 Coates Hall,
Baton Rouge, LA 70803, USA
e-mail: edow1@lsu.edu

The Problem

Today's archivists face the challenge of identifying, organizing, providing intellectual access to, and preserving traditional physical media: paper, tape, vinyl disc, and film-based documents. In addition they must do the same for a growing variety of electronic media including word-processing formats, relational databases, digitally produced audio materials, still images, video formats, electronic mail, and all manner of personal expression formats on the world wide web.

Programs in archives education in North American universities reside in departments of history or library science and typically depend on one or fewer full-time, graduate-level, tenure-track faculty to teach the courses in that specialty. The typical program includes two or three specialized courses plus an internship and/or an independent study—not much depth in a program designed to produce caretakers of the historical record which grows more complex every day. Obviously a lone faculty member has neither the expertise nor the time to address all the core issues that will make a well-educated new archivist. Similar faculty limitations exist for specializations in larger disciplines, like language departments, biology departments, and other professional schools which may have only one faculty member for a given specialization and none for some.

Compounding the archives education problem, potential students in archives management typically see themselves as place bound. An informal poll among archives educators taken during the grant-writing process confirmed that archives students tend to be adults looking for a second career. Many have family and work responsibilities. While they want a solid archives education, they will not or cannot leave home to acquire it; and the profession does not provide enough economic incentive to overcome these barriers. Therefore, despite the need for more sophisticated new archivists, institutions offering archives education programs have found that the low demand in any one geographic area precludes developing a program large enough to address the educational needs of the students effectively. Institutions have no choice but to restrict the number and focus of courses they provide, even though students may have time for and interest in more specialized courses. By the criteria Hayduk (1994) defined, an archives education program qualifies as a niche curriculum market.

To address their shared problem, in 2002 five schools created the Southeast Archives Education Collaborative (SAEC) as an experiment in resource sharing of archives education courses through compressed video transmitted using the Internet 2 protocol as their delivery mode. This undertaking was funded by a National Leadership grant from the Institute for Museum and Library Services; and the five schools involved were Auburn University's Department of History (AU), Georgia College and State University's Department of History (GCSU), Louisiana State University's School of Library and Information Science (LSU), University of Kentucky's School of Library and Information Science (UK), and the University of South Carolina's School of Library and Information Science and History Department (SC). In January of 2003, GCSU found it had to withdraw from the program as it did not have Internet 2 capability in place. Over the following 2 years, the four remaining schools developed a formal administrative collaborative. In the spring of 2005, SC announced that it could not continue because the form of distance education the SAEC had adopted did not fit either its established distance education model or the university's new accounting system. Over the summer of 2005 the SAEC added two new partners, Middle Tennessee State University (MTSU) and Indiana University (IU), and the Collaborative continues with that makeup today.

This collaboration reflects a global trend in what Quinn (2001) called “disaggregation” based on advanced communication technology. He observed that knowledge economy institutions (services based on specialized knowledge) have begun to restructure themselves from generalist institutions into centers of specialized knowledge interconnected by communications technology. “Each knowledge center develops its own skills in depth around its core competencies and broadcasts its needs and capabilities to others—combining with them to solve specific problems as required” (p. 32). Now into their sixth year as an organization, and fifth year of providing courses, the SAEC partners have created a framework for continuing the program indefinitely.

Literature Review

Cooperative distance education between universities is not new. Since World War II, courses and degrees provided through intercollegiate cooperation have sprung up across the U.S.A., most of them attacking the economies of scale barrier to which Hayduk (1994) referred. Early programs, like Five Colleges (Margulus et al. 2003; Peterson 2002) in Massachusetts, go back decades. Similar cooperative projects arose in small geographic regions where institutions saw cooperation as a cost-savings strategy to extend course offerings for which students traveled from one campus to another. When telecommunication technology had matured sufficiently, cooperative projects drew larger regions together for general educational purposes (Dotolo 2002) or provided a way to deliver mainstream professional courses of study, such as nursing and pharmacy, in sparsely populated regions (Cardenas 1998; McRae 1997; Mangan 2001; Storch and Gamroth 2002; Wilson et al. 1994; Zlatic et al. 2000). Feasley’s (2003) review of regional and national organizations categorized such cooperative efforts as technology networking organizations, regional consortia, virtual universities, and curriculum specialization. He found the last group dominated by programs for professional training and credentialing.

Thach and Murphy (1994) categorized distance education collaboration along a continuum from instructional design among a team of faculty collaborating across institutional boundaries, class-to-class collaboration in which classes at different institutions work together, to institution-to-institution collaboration in which “different institutions work together to offer complete degree or continuing education programs to students at distant sites” (p. 9). They also described the administrative structure of the participants in the examples of institution-to-institution collaboration they provided.

The literature on the administration of distance education largely addresses the administration of the distance education facility on a campus. Some works look at general aspects of distance education (Care and Scanlan 2001; Simonsen and Bauck 2003), and some focus on a single issue (Giannoni and Tesone 2003; King 2001). Few define administrative models. An early work that did so (Perraton 1991) described three possible models and some variations within each of them: (1) a single institution that wants to expand itself through distance education (e.g., University of Illinois’ School of Library of Information Science’s LEEP 2008 program, University of South Carolina’s School of Library and Information Science 2008), (2) a consortium of partners which answers to a central administrative body (e.g., Great Plains Interactive Distance Education Alliance 2004), and (3) a multi-purpose free-standing institution (e.g., University of Phoenix’s Axia College 2008, Open University 2008).

A decade after Perraton (1991), Carliner (2001) added a type which he called “a joint offering” in which “a course taught by University E is broadcast or webcast to University F.

Students in each university enroll through their own institutions and are governed by the policies and procedures for their home institutions” (issue 1). The SAEC falls into this category.

In his “Foreword” to Hope and Guiton’s (2006) *Strategies for Sustainable Open and Distance Learning*, Sir John Daniel discussed six factors he regards as fundamental requirements for sustainable distance learning programs. First, the organizers must have a clarity of purpose and remain focused on it. Second, the program must work on a viable business model. Third, the institutional structure must suit the mission. Fourth, the organization must have good leadership. Fifth, faculty must feel good about what they are doing, and students must feel they receive good course materials, effective support services, and good logistics. Finally, the academic program must have both intellectually and practically exciting content to draw future generations of students. The following discussion of the SAEC will return to those criteria as a measure of success.

SAEC Policies

Carliner (2001) focused his article on the joint offering arrangement, and laid out specific administrative recommendations for those programs. However, he failed to mention a number of critical issues the SAEC confronted. In fact, the literature does not address the administration of a collaborative effort in which partners of equal standing work with no central authority over them. Simonson and Bauck defined the general issues which any distance education program will face: academic policies; fiscal, geographic, and governance challenges; and faculty concerns (p. 418). The SAEC Advisory Board faced all of those and developed its policies, based on good will and common sense, as need arose.

Governing the Collaborative

The Institute for Museum and Library Services grant called for an Advisory Board to set policy for the Collaborative. Each partner school chooses its own representatives to the Advisory Board; and membership tends to include the archives educators, program-level administrators, technical representatives, and instructional designers. The Advisory Board holds a 2-day face-to-face meeting annually. In addition to the annual meetings, the partners meet monthly in an hour-and-a-half long e-meeting using compressed video over Internet 2. While the annual meetings focus on the large policy, scheduling, and vision issues, the monthly e-meetings focus on the process of getting the work done.

The Collaborative relies on a moderator to run its meetings: an individual who managed his own collaborative for 6 years and had a decade of experience with a developing international consortium. He understands group dynamics, and during the debate on any given issue he has no vested interest in a particular solution since he is not a member of the Board. Well into its sixth year of meetings and course-sharing, nobody has ever raised a voice, walked out of a meeting, or obstructed a decision, even as the partners worked through the most contentious issues. Having someone who keeps the discussion flowing smoothly allows the participants to focus on the issues and not get distracted by procedural difficulties and conflicts.

At the end of the third year of the grant, the Advisory Board drew up a Letter of Agreement in which each school or department head agreed to continue the Collaborative as an ongoing commitment. The Letter referenced a set of Guiding Principles (SAEC 2005) which details the Board’s policies. The Letter of Agreement and Guiding Principles do not constitute a legal contract. They merely articulate a set of agreed-on policies and procedures

by which the archives education programs at five universities collaborate, rather like the model found in the World Wide Web Consortium's Membership Agreement (2008) (Clause 9). The fact that this collaboration has no legal standing means it operates with minimal involvement of the institutions' upper level administrative levels (provosts, graduate councils, etc.). It also assures that everyone participating wants to participate and will work for the good of the whole; nobody *has to* participate.

Working Within Institutional Policies

Institutional administrative challenges vary from campus to campus. The first Advisory Board included the Dean of SLIS at LSU, the Director of SLIS at Kentucky, and senior faculty from the other partners. Those representatives emphasized to their upper level administrators that each school/department received at least three additional courses for the cost of providing one. That fact made supporting the program, as one said, "a no-brainer." Thus assured of upper-level support, the Board sought and found solutions to all administrative issues within the mid-level administrative jurisdiction of deans and department chairs, understanding that the less entanglement the partner schools and departments had with upper-level policy- and rules-making, the more flexible and creative it could be. The following paragraphs detail the administrative solutions the Advisory Board established.

Money. The IMLS grant paid for the extraordinary expenses (largely travel) needed to establish the Collaborative, but it provided no money for ordinary expenses associated with a course—space, faculty salary, library and similar support materials—costs institutions would bear in the normal course of business. From the beginning each partner bore the costs of providing, receiving, and administering the courses on its own campus and so developed solid data about the costs/benefits of its involvement. The Collaborative chose to deliver its courses and e-meetings through compressed video carried over Internet 2. Since all the partner universities' distance education infrastructures administered and funded the facilities, the only real expense each partner now faces for post-grant collaboration comes from the cost of the annual meeting for its members on the Advisory Board.

Credentials of Courses and Faculty. Given that all the partners have roughly equal Carnegie Foundation status and that most of the courses are taught by tenure-track faculty, the Board agreed to accept the credentialing process on each campus: if the providing school thinks a faculty member acceptable, the partners will too. By the same logic, the partners do not develop special courses for the Collaborative. By offering courses drawn from its own curriculum, each partner assures the others that the course carries the imprimatur of having passed the provider's course and curriculum requirements. Further, each partner assures that the courses it develops meet a local need first and an SAEC need second.

Calendars. Courses follow the calendar of the providing school and adhere to the contact-time requirements of the providing campus partner. Working with the technology representatives, the Board secured set times for classes. The technology units control the classrooms in which they have facilities and assure the partners' space in which to give or receive a class.

Adhering to the providing partner's calendar requires a special commitment from the receiving partners' technical personnel: they must provide support for courses before or after the receiving campuses' academic year and during its academic breaks. Further, students need access to buildings which might ordinarily be closed at some times during the year. None of

the partners has encountered any systemic resistance to these needs. At all schools, the SAEC courses initiated the use of Internet 2 for delivery of regular credit courses, and the departments responsible for technological support seem to regard the Collaborative as good use of their services and a contribution to their justification for existence.

Registration and Grading. Since the SAEC does not produce a degree, each partner has the freedom to handle registration and grading according to home-campus policy; each archives educator serves as the Instructor of Record for his or her students' campus. Students register for local credit and pay their normal fees. Some of the partners use "special topic" courses to enroll students in incoming SAEC courses; others use "independent study" courses. At the end of the semester, the teaching faculty member sends each Instructor of Record grades to post. Since not all partners use pluses and minuses on letter grades, faculty members send a number grade which the Instructor of Record converts to the appropriate letter grade.

These registration and grading solutions/policies do have drawbacks for the students. Since deadlines for grade submission relate to the home-campus calendar, in at least one situation the providing school's schedule fell sufficiently behind a receiving school that the Instructor of Record at the receiving school had to assign an Incomplete to meet the campus grading deadline. Less than a week later, the Incomplete turned to a real grade, however, as the providing school's courses ended. Further, if a course title appears simply as "Special Topic" or "Independent Study" on a student's transcript, a prospective employer will have difficulty assessing the true academic preparation of a student. In addition, the home campus may impose a limit to the number of independent study credits it will recognize. To address these problems, now that the SAEC has established itself as an on-going relationship, some of the partners have applied for and received home-campus names and numbers for courses the SAEC partners offer regularly.

Disciplinary Issues. Since students accepted the home campus rules when they registered at their institution, the Board found it fairly obvious that all student wrong-doing and grievances would have to be addressed according to the rules of the home campus. As the Instructor of Record for all SAEC courses on the home campus, each archives educator accepts responsibility for the home-campus process. If a problem arises, such as a question of academic honesty or a grade appeal, the Instructor of Record will handle the case on the students' home campus according to the home campus rules. In 6 years, however, no such problem has arisen.

The Collaborative attributes its administrative success to two fundamental facts: first, no money or records change hands. Each partner administers its programs on its own campus, receives the tuition, grants the credit, and handles the problems that might arise, all according to home campus rules. Second, the technical costs have no impact on departmental budgets. Each partner has the tools to deliver and receive courses free of direct departmental cost.

Working Within the SAEC Policies

From the beginning, the Board saw the Collaborative as a source of advanced courses. Each partner provides its own introductory course, generically referred to as Archives 101. Also from the beginning, the instructors of Archives 101 recognized that they needed to "harmonize" the content and emphasis of their courses so that course instructors could make certain assumptions about what students at partner schools know. As a result, the instructors of Archives 101 on all campuses have put into place the first of the Thach and

Murphy (1994) models by becoming an inter-collegiate faculty team that works on instructional design for application across institutional boundaries. While discussion of the SAEC efforts at “Harmonizing Archives 101” does not fall within the scope of this article, the effort has been intense and the results fruitful.

Course Offerings. At its first annual meeting, the Advisory Board took up the issue of what courses to offer. A lengthy debate over whether to offer a course in Preservation of Historical Materials highlighted the differences between the library science programs and the history programs in the Collaborative. The library science programs all have such a course and did not need one from a partner; the history program did not have that course and wanted one. In the end, the Board decided that at least half the partners must endorse a course before the Collaborative will offer it. This decision emphasizes the Collaborative’s mission to enhance an institution’s set of basic courses, not to provide it.

Each partner provides unique courses, based on the strength of the faculty on that campus. At every annual meeting the Board reviews the course schedule and now schedules 5 years ahead (SAEC 2008). While they recognize that the course list will need adjusting a little each year in response to unforeseen circumstances, the partners understand that the process of planning the schedule makes it more stable, giving both students and the partners an opportunity to plan their programs.

Class Size. The hardest issue the board faced, class size, filled much conversation during the first 2 years. Graduate education implies intense work and interaction among students and instructor. Given the Collaborative’s use of compressed video format, the Board debated how big a class it could offer as “graduate education.” Over time the Board settled on a maximum of 35 students (fewer for seminars), divided unevenly among the providing school and the receiving partners. The providing school reserves half the seats for itself and allows each of the remaining four partners equal numbers of the rest of the seats. A month before the semester starts, seats not claimed by one partner become available to the others. To date, SAEC course enrollments have ranged in size from three to 33 students; 12–15 tends to be “normal”.

Classroom Rules. As the providing school controls the calendar and clock of the class, the faculty member sets the content and “rules” of the course and grading standards and lives by the home-campus rules on copyright and intellectual property rights. The Board expects faculty members to design and conduct courses in a way that provides an equal opportunity for all students, but beyond that, faculty members have the same academic freedom within the Collaborative as they have in their home institutions. “Equal opportunity” means that students must have equal access to materials. That has entailed having home-campus libraries add a title or two to support in-coming courses. The partners have encountered no resistance to these requested purchases. Further, the faculty member teaching a course must work with the Instructors of Record to make sure that all students have equal access to campus courseware and non-library materials. Most faculty members use email distributions or electronic distribution through the campus courseware for non-library materials.

The equal access concept also influences how the faculty member conducts office hours and help sessions. Instructors will not generally entertain questions from local students who approach them in a way that distance students cannot. Most students ask their questions through email, although some phone the faculty member. If faculty members suspect that the answer to one student’s question might interest the full class, they distribute the question and answer to the entire class.

Class Admission. Students on the partner campuses learn about the existence of the SAEC courses in a number of ways. Partners include them on their course schedules, marked as SAEC courses; if they have a local course name and number, they appear in the institution's catalog. All archives students learn about them from the faculty member who teaches their Archives 101 course. Others, outside the archives track, learn through word-of-mouth. In theory SAEC courses provide advanced archives studies grounded in the basics of Archives 101. In reality, students who have not taken Archives 101 frequently request permission to take courses, either simultaneously with Archives 101 or without it. When a student without the established prerequisites asks to take a course, the teaching faculty member and Instructor of Record discuss the request. If the faculty member thinks the course really requires the knowledge from the Archives 101 course, the question goes no further. If, however, the faculty member sees the Archives 101 background as useful but not essential, the decision falls on the Instructor of Record as to whether or not the student can handle the advanced course for which she or he may not have full preparation. In all cases, if the faculty member and Instructor of Record discuss a student, they notify the student of the discussion.

"Making" a Course. While every partner must offer at least one course each year, none must receive all that the Collaborative offers. On the other hand, if a course fails to draw a campus minimum at a providing school, administrators have agreed to provide it anyway. Campus minimums do not appear as an issue for a receiving school since the course has no overhead to cover, and generally the technical support is already available. Therefore, it is not uncommon for only one or two students to attend an in-coming course.

Evaluation. In keeping with the logical framework of reciprocity, the home-campus remains the seat of evaluation of both the course and the faculty member. All partners evaluate the classes they provide. Some of the partners evaluate courses they receive; others do not.

Additional Issues to Consider

Issues Relating to Faculty

Participation in the Collaborative has no remunerative rewards for faculty members. The impact participation has on promotion and retention decisions remains a home-campus matter. At the same time, faculty members find that involvement with the Collaborative has some of the qualities of a dual appointment. As they know their colleagues in their home institutions will address those areas in which they have minimum expertise, they know that their SAEC partners will do likewise. In return, both sets of colleagues will look to them to teach their own specialties. This allows faculty members to specialize in topics they know and enjoy. As a result, students benefit by having a widely read and deeply experienced faculty member in every course they take through the Collaborative.

Issues Relating to Marketing

As discussed earlier, most archives students stay close to home; in that sense, the partners do not compete with each other for students. Partners must assume, however, that they do compete to some degree for the handful of sophisticated students with a specific archives

specialty in mind. By relying on the SAEC to provide courses a partner institution cannot, each can develop an emphasis in its individual program that reflects the strength and interest of its faculty. So, while the Collaborative uses the slogan, “Enroll in One—Attend Five”, it does not mean to imply that attending one partner school will provide the same education that attending any of the others will. Each has a distinct personality. Hanna (2003) reported that “collaborations or strategic partnerships that bring together two or more universities are also being formed to increase the competitive position of existing universities” (p. 69). Though Hanna’s focus has an entrepreneurial edge that the SAEC partners originally did not, all now see their participation in the Collaborative as a useful marketing element. They have begun to find that their participation in the SAEC draws students to their campuses because of the opportunities it offers over other archives education programs in their region.

Conclusion

Hayduk (1994) identified the educational barriers which conventional educational programs cannot overcome, but which distance education can address successfully: “intrinsic barriers of time or space, poor economics of scale, or difficulties of institutional quality control” (p. 47). The SAEC partners individually faced most of them. Dirr (2003) observed that “collaborators often struggle to devise relationships that draw on the strengths to create and deliver new products to meet the perceived needs of vast populations of adult learners.” The SAEC partners did not struggle, perhaps because they were not creating new products, but merely delivering what they already had. They remained small and focused on their own students and declined requests from institutions wanting to join. More partners would have meant more students who would increase class size beyond a reasonable definition of graduate education. At the same time that the partners kept their institutional membership small, they doubled the number of courses they offer. Since the beginning of the program the course offerings have grown from two courses per semester to four, and several partners have established a formal certificate program in archives management.

The SAEC satisfies the six fundamental requirements Sir John Daniel (2006) identified as critical for the success of a distance learning program. The partners have a clarity of purpose and have remained focused on it. The Collaborative works on a proven business model. The Collaborative’s governance and delivery structure suits the mission of the partners. The Collaborative’s leadership has remained steady. Faculty members feel good about their participation. It allows them to teach their specialty, and they clearly recognize the benefits their students receive. Finally, students have responded in overwhelmingly positive ways.

Quantitative and qualitative evaluations done during the grant period showed consistently high approval for the program, despite technical glitches and annoying features inherent in the delivery method. Typical comments included, “While the technologies occasionally caused problems... they still allowed us to take a class we could not normally have had access to. Putting up with technological frustrations is well worth the effort in learning as much as possible about the archival profession.” (SC, Spring 2004); “The compressed video course is far superior to any completely web-based course I’ve taken because the sense of a cohesive class is maintained through direct interaction with class mates and regular class meetings.” (LSU, Spring 2005); “I have access to courses I might not have been able to take if they were not offered through this collaborative. No graduate program can offer the diversity and richness of courses I have been able to get by having

access to courses from all 5 schools.” (UKY, Fall 2006); “I found communicating with persons from different schools an asset to my learning. The other students had different perspectives that contributed to my education.” (AU, Fall 2004).

Anecdotally, the author, who teaches at LSU, has received comments from former students such as, “When I interviewed for my job, the committee kept mentioning the [large] number of archives courses I had,” (LSU student); “I could not have gotten the job that I did without your course,” (SC student); and “I use what I learned in your course every day of the week.” (UKY student).

Hayduk (1994) argued that “niche markets based upon overcoming real barriers of time and space or upon the need for economies of scale are long-term markets for distance education.” (p. 48.) The partners plan to continue the SAEC indefinitely.

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