

Alliance Leadership

Virginia Moxley, Dean, College of Human Ecology & Co-Director, Institute for Academic Alliances, Kansas State University

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The Great Plains Interactive Distance Education Alliance (Great Plains IDEA) is an alliance of Human Sciences and Agriculture colleges in research universities in ten states. The Alliance, founded in 1994, sponsors multi-institutional online undergraduate and graduate programs. I have represented Kansas State University on the leadership team of the alliance since its inception. These leadership observations grow out of my participation with Great Plains IDEA.

It is a network, not a ladder. Alliances are built on personal relationships, not on position authority. No one individual has any particular power over any other. In such an environment, the least committed participant (not the most committed) controls the outcome of joint work.

Be particular about partners. The culture and management practices of the partner institutions will make collective work easier or harder. Get well acquainted with the proposed partner institutions before you initiate a project.

Generosity and truth telling. When alliance leaders have a tendency to act generously, alliances flourish. When alliance leaders have the willingness to speak the truth in meetings, alliances can meet the needs of all partner institutions.

Meet and talk, vs. meet and do. When higher education administrators meet, they learn a great deal of useful information by talking. Generally they leave meetings invigorated by shared information. Less frequently do they leave meetings committed to implementing a plan of action.

Everyone has a full desk already. Participants in partnership projects generally have a full institutional workload before they take on the obligations of partnership development. While alliance leaders can depend on good will, leaders cannot depend on action. Reminders, incentives, shared accountability can help.

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www.iaa.ksu.edu
call: 785-532-1999
email: iaa@ksu.edu**

Communications hubs. Ask for information from many people and few reply. Put someone in charge of institutional communications to the alliance.

It takes a team. Institutional representatives to inter-institutional partnerships require support from a home team of individuals representing faculty, academic administration, finance, continuing education, and data management.

Succession plans. Alliance leaders are less enduring than alliances are. A strategy to prepare and promote alliance participants into alliance leadership assures continuity of outcomes.

Balancing act. Alliance participants are constantly balancing institutional and alliance interests. When the scales tip, institutional interests will prevail.

Simplify/Simplify/Simplify. Any plan created by higher education administrators has a tendency to become more complicated over time. Do not over-engineer solutions.

The Institute for Academic Alliances (IAA) was founded in April 2004 to encourage and assist higher education institutions to develop and deliver collaborative online academic programs. The IAA works with academic institutions to rapidly deploy innovative, high-quality collaborative academic programs in emerging fields. Since its inception, the IAA has worked with 16 higher education alliances involving over 100 higher education institutions in 37 states.