



In Brief

Community College and One-Stop Center Collaboration: The Role of Community College Collaborative Agents

By Maxine L. Russman

One-stop Work Force Development Centers

In recent decades, many community colleges have expanded efforts to build communities through partnerships and collaborations as part of their comprehensive missions. An on-going community need is local economic development and the skill enhancement of its work force. Historically, the community college has played a key role in addressing the education needs of the workplace (Eisen, 1997). Community colleges have responded to these needs by offering traditional career programs for new work force entrants, skill upgrading for individuals desiring work advancement, and customized training for employed individuals.

For the past decade, federal and state policymakers have increasingly emphasized the voluntary collaboration of local entities involved in work force development. In recent years, a number of legislative mandates have actually required the cooperation and coordination of local providers of work force development programs and services receiving public funds. A natural outgrowth of this trend was the creation of one-stop delivery centers. The one-stop delivery system is a collaboration of work force development entities in which a facility serves as a single-point-of-access, a place where individuals seeking employment and employers seeking employees may receive needed assistance.

The one-stop delivery system concept is based on a "collaboration philosophy" of service delivery, defined as a process entered into by stakeholders of a particular problem domain who view different aspects of the problem and work together to constructively explore their differences and search for solutions that go beyond their own limited vision (Gray, 1989). The one-stop delivery system is designed to provide improved access to work force development resources by gathering them all in a single physical location.

In the mid-1990s, the initial establishment of the one-stop delivery systems encouraged, but did not mandate, community colleges to participate. However, some community colleges, because of their comprehensive mission to address community building through economic and workforce development, elected to voluntarily enter into the one-stop delivery system collaboration.

The Community College Collaborative Agent

The community college employee representing the college in the one-stop delivery system collaboration serves as its "collaborative agent," generally a person with formal connections to a collaborating organization, accountable to that organization, and actively engaged in the collaborative process with community partners. The collaborative agent must balance and integrate the interests and mission of the community college with those of the collaborative partners. In the collaboration process, the collaborative agent plays a critical role that is fundamentally different from the traditional model of formal leadership in which leaders bring a recognized, formal authority to make agreements on behalf of their organizations (Gershwin, 1999).

To better understand the role of the community college collaborative agent in the development of one-stop delivery systems, a case study was designed and conducted. The perspectives of collaborative agents, community college leaders, and one-stop collaborative partners were examined in this study in order to better understand what it means to be a community college collaborative agent, how community college collaborative agents balance the mission and interests of the college and those of the partners, and how they facilitate or inhibit the process of maintaining commitment for the collaboration. The study was also designed to explore the characteristics of an effective community col-

lege collaborative agent and issues related to where the collaborative agent is physically housed.

To pursue this research, two case sites were identified in a mid-western state. They are referred to here as Metro Community College and Mid-America Community College. These colleges were selected as two that had: 1) been actively engaged in the development of the one-stop delivery system concept from its initial stages, 2) had voluntarily participated in the initial development of the local one-stop delivery systems, and 3) had provided programs and services on-site at the one-stop centers.

Case Study Findings

According to both community college leaders and collaborative agents, the community college's comprehensive mission statement justifies their colleges' participation in the one-stop delivery system. When the one-stop delivery system partners initially approached the colleges' leaders, they not only agreed to participate in the one-stop delivery system, but also committed to placing college personnel at the one-stop center. In both cases, the collaborative agent was encouraged and supported in playing a strong leadership role with the one-stop partners on-site.

Reasons for Involvement by the College

According to Cross (1985), moderate-size colleges such as Mid-American Community College tend to have a more horizontal focus, meaning that the college fulfills its comprehensive mission by cooperating with business and government entities to address educational needs related to the economic health of the district and to enrich the life of the community. When a college's connections with the community are historically strong, the leaders hardly question participation in a one-stop delivery system. At Mid-America an invitation did not need to be extended to the college because they were already leading the work force development partnerships that were precursory to the one-stop delivery system collaboration. In the Mid-America case, there was no wavering regarding the college's participation in the one-stop center collaboration. The collaborative agents were expected to build upon the existing long-term relationships with their community partners.

Factors Affecting the Level of Involvement

However, the community colleges' level of involvement in the one-stop delivery system was affected by economic and administrative changes that caused uncertainties about program priorities, also impacting the role of the colleges' collaborative agent. At both sites, community college leaders were committed to participation in the one-stop delivery

system as long as there were available grant funds and revenue generated by fees-for-service. The level of commitment fluctuated when there was a downturn in enrollments and when new college administrators were hired. In the Metro Community College case, services to the community were not considered as important as increasing enrollments that, in turn, generated state funds for the college. Participation in the one-stop delivery system became a strategy for enrollment generation. The college's role in providing a community service, although integral to the comprehensive mission, became secondary to the practical concern of losing funding through declining enrollments.

Although both community colleges were steadfast in their commitment to the one-stop delivery system, the college leaders and collaborative agents were continuously assessing their colleges' level of participation as economic and administrative changes occurred. While being part of the one-stop delivery collaboration was clearly a commitment, determining which programs and services to provide and whether or not to have personnel present at the one-stop center were issues to be discussed and evaluated.

A previous history of collaboration with community partners was a critical factor in the community colleges' decision to participate in and maintain commitment to the one-stop delivery system. This finding was consistent with research conducted by Gulati (1995) that concluded that inter-organization alliance formation patterns are affected by the organizations' social structures. Previously allied organizations are likely to engage in further collaborations. In fact, one of the primary reasons mentioned by the leaders as to why the community college volunteered to participate in the initial one-stop delivery systems was that they had a previous history of working with the partners involved. Participation did not occur as an isolated experience. Both community college presidents had a history of serving on the local work force development councils.

The Role of the Collaborative Agent

For the community colleges, active engagement meant having a collaborative agent at the table for discussions of vision and strategic planning and using the one-stop center as a vehicle for relaying information regarding the college's programs and services. Further, the partners at the one-stop centers viewed the presence of the collaborative agent as an indicator of the colleges' level of commitment. When the community college leaders removed the collaborative agent, they risked the possibility of conveying to the one-stop partners that the collaboration was somehow less important. Once a college assigned a collaborative agent at the one-stop center, the one-stop partners tended to expect it to continue as evidence of the college's commitment.

The Qualities of an Effective Collaborative Agent

One-stop delivery system partners and community college collaborative agents emphasized the importance of the collaborative agent's personal qualities in considering their effectiveness. The one-stop delivery system partners, when asked about the role of the community college collaborative agent in their collaborations, spoke in terms of personal attributes and skills. One of the employment services directors stated, "You have to have the right person, or it will flop," clearly summing up the importance of the collaborative agent's personal qualities to the one-stop partners.

The college collaborative agents described their role in terms of the skills needed to perform their responsibilities effectively. The collaborative agents said they needed to be self-initiators, excellent communicators, organized, and knowledgeable about all aspects of the college, the one-stop partners, and the business community.

In contrast, the community college leaders spoke of the collaborative agent as the means by which the mission of the college was implemented. The collaborative agent was the individual responsible for the particular program or service deemed most appropriate for the one-stop system. From the community college leaders' perspectives "getting along with people" and having the collaborative spirit were assumed to be part of belonging to the college culture. One-stop partners viewed these as necessary and exceptional traits, and believed that community college leaders should give them more careful consideration in order to better secure an effective collaborative relationship.

The ability to form connections was named by collaborative agents, community college leaders, and one-stop partners as the most essential skill of a collaborative agent in facilitating the collaboration process and maintaining commitment. According to Chrislip and Larson's (1994) research on leadership in collaboration, collaboration requires a new type of leadership, one that must balance opposites. Collaborative agents need to promote and safeguard the collaborative effort, and yet protect their parent organization. They need to interact at high levels at times, yet sometimes listen and withdraw; they needed see the larger vision, and yet focus on the immediate picture. They also need to be able to represent the parent organization's interests when, in fact, they may have no formal authority or power.

The collaborative agents in this study were able to achieve this type of leadership through their ability to form connections. Connecting involved multiple levels of communication and varying formats—face-to-face, written, and electronic. The community college collaborative agents served as the link between the one-stop partners and the college administration, among the one-stop partners themselves,

between the one-stop center personnel and college programs and student services personnel, and among the one-stop partners, community agencies, and representatives of business and industry.

Recommendations for Policy and Practice

As federal and state policy encourages an increased level of participation of community colleges in one-stop delivery systems, colleges need to make decisions regarding the level of resources to commit to the one-stop centers. This may involve assessing the value of having a collaborative agent physically located at the one-stop center. If a decision is made to have the collaborative agent present, adequate support and communication structures are needed to keep him/her linked to and engaged with the college. If the choice is to not have a collaborative agent on-site, communication structures and support are needed to link the collaborative agent to the purpose and interests of the one-stop delivery system.

Community colleges need to assess their mission and interests in light of federal and state policies that require colleges' engagement in community collaboration. To opt for a comprehensive mission with limited resources means making hard choices among competing program priorities such as expanded academic offerings, student access, and generating enrollments versus providing community services that may or may not generate enrollments. For college personnel representing the college in community outreach, understanding the mission and the college leadership's priorities is critical to the fulfillment of their role in fostering an effective collaboration.

Careful consideration should go into selecting and training of community college personnel who serve as collaborative agents. Community college leaders need to recognize that collaborative leadership requires a different set of skills from those of traditional leaders. Selecting the appropriate individual to represent the community college in collaborative endeavors is critical to successful outcomes. The leadership skills and character traits of the individual collaborative agent may be more important than subject-matter expertise.

The community college's choices regarding involvement in collaboration today may influence future collaborative involvement. The initial reasons for getting involved in collaboration will very likely change over time. Community colleges need to have an organizational structure in place that allows internal key personnel the opportunity for ongoing discussion of shifting trends and the evolving role of the college in collaborative efforts.

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