

The Networked University

Building Alliances for
Innovation in Higher Education

By Jeffrey J. Selingo



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About Jeffrey J. Selingo

Jeffrey J. Selingo has written about higher education for two decades. He is the author of three books, the newest of which, *There Is Life After College* (HarperCollins, 2016), is a New York Times bestseller. Named one of LinkedIn's must know influencers of 2016, Jeff is a special advisor and professor of practice at Arizona State University, a visiting scholar at Georgia Tech's Center for 21st Century Universities, and a regular contributor to *The Washington Post*. You can find out more about him at jeffselingo.com.

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Executive Summary

For more than a century, U.S. higher education institutions have joined together in cooperative associations. These collaborative efforts have come about because of geography or similar missions, or sometimes have been forced by state governments looking to build systems of institutions. While a few have been successful at producing breakthrough innovations and cost savings that individual institutions couldn't achieve on their own, for the most part the associations have simply created groups of campuses working side-by-side rather than together.

Today, a new type of alliance is beginning to emerge in higher education. Rather than coalitions built around geography, mission, or even athletics, these new associations are assembled around a common set of problems that multiple campuses need to address but have found they cannot solve on their own. These new alliances are less about shared purchasing or exchanging best practices, and more about developing strategic solutions, many leveraging technology, to solve some of higher education's toughest problems related to access, retention, completion, and making good on the promise of digital education tools.

To efficiently and effectively tackle the most pressing problems, U.S. colleges and universities need scale. But not every institution has the ability to grow nor wants to expand to gain the efficiencies size can bring. By joining together in alliances built around common problems individual institutions can gain many of the benefits of size without expanding their enrollment.

For these new coalitions to be successful, institutional leaders need to have a stake in their success, dedicate campus personnel to the initiatives in order to give institutions skin in the game, tackle specific projects rather than vague ideas, create incentive systems for institutions to want to join, and measure their success.

Our hope is that this new era of cooperation in higher education will result in deep alliances and collaborative platforms around nearly every function on a campus from admissions to academic affairs to career services. But what will make this 21st century version of collaboration different from anything in the past is a robust web of academic partnerships between institutions.

This is the **Networked University**, and in the pages that follow, I outline a vision for linking multiple institutions to create a modern model of higher education.

Introduction

In April 1957, the presidents of the Big Ten athletic conference gathered at Ohio State University for the inauguration of the university's new president. A year earlier an impromptu meeting between the chancellor of Indiana University and an official with the Carnegie Corporation of New York had resulted in a pledge of some \$40,000 to regularly convene the presidents of the Big Ten around academic matters.

Now the leaders gathered at Ohio State wanted to formalize the agreement, hoping that an academic alignment might strengthen their institutions against what they saw as a growing competitive threat for research dollars, students, and faculty from universities on the east and west coasts of the United States. They formed a board with representatives from each of the campuses.

And then not much happened for two decades.

The creation of that board, which became known as the Committee on Institutional Cooperation, or the CIC, arrived before the advent of low-cost communications and transportation. The institutions in the Big Ten were largely rural campuses spread across more than half a dozen states. Working together in practice proved much more difficult than imagining the broad concept in that meeting at Ohio State.

A perhaps even stronger force against collaboration was the natural reluctance for competitors to cooperate, even in an athletic conference that already existed. Although higher education in the United States is typically described as a "system," the notion of collaboration is not deeply ingrained in the DNA of most institutions. Despite its veneer of cooperation, higher education is a competitive industry, where resource sharing is eyed warily and sometimes with fear of government intervention given more recent federal antitrust concerns.

Indiana's chancellor, Herman B. Wells, would describe the CIC's first steps in those early years as "hesitant and tentative." Each of the universities, Wells would later write, "was a distinguished and apparently self-sufficient institution, proud of its past and confident of its future."¹

That reluctance began to change by the 1980s, thanks to technology that allowed easier sharing of information between campuses. Indeed, the first substantial project between the universities in the Big Ten was technology-driven when the campuses built a fiber optic network to connect themselves to each other and to other research centers around the world. Other large-scale projects followed: joint licensing agreements for software, a partnership with Google to digitize millions of bound volumes in their library collections, and course-sharing for dozens of language classes.

Today the CIC, renamed the Big Ten Academic Alliance, stands as an oft-cited example within academia of how partnerships can succeed across institutional boundaries. However, while alliances like the Big Ten were adequate to address the challenges facing higher education fifty years ago, what is needed to tackle the pressing issues of today are broader and deeper alliances that cut across historical boundaries between institutions.

Historic Alliances

Alliances of some kind have long existed in higher education, of course. In most cases, those collaborative efforts can be best described as "loosely coupled federations" of independent campuses that typically cooperate only at the margins of the institution on matters where there is low risk and clear agreement on solutions.

These existing alliances can be classified in one of four ways:

Geographic

The most common alliance in higher education is the one formed by state borders. In the years after World War II, most states organized their public institutions into systems. However, no one model of system governance emerged in the United States. Some states, such as California, have multiple state systems of institutions based on mission (i.e., two-year colleges, teaching institutions, and research universities); other states, such as Virginia, have so-called coordinating boards that advocate for public higher education but have little direct authority over individual institutions; while others, such as North Carolina, have a strong central system with considerable authority. But in nearly all cases **this type of alliance is forced, is often focused on control and rules, and usually includes institutions with differing ambitions and resources.**

Shared services

Often a byproduct of geography, institutions of all types and sizes that are located near each other have joined up to share purchasing, library services, technology, police services, or allow cross-registration of courses. Most shared-service agreements **focus exclusively on the business side of institutions in an effort to save money in the procurement process.** A few intercollege consortia have existed for decades that go deeper on the academic side, most notably the Five Colleges, Inc. in Amherst, Mass, and Claremont College, in California. While shared-service agreements have become more popular in recent years, they still often rely on institutions being located near one another and rarely include deep academic alliances.

Mission-oriented

An alphabet soup of dozens of associations from the Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities (APLU) to the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities (NAICU) exists at the national and state level to bring together institutions with similar missions. These associations **mostly exist to lobby on public policy and provide professional development opportunities for their members.** Like state systems, however, these associations are increasingly linking together institutions with divergent strategies and approaches to the problems and issues facing higher education. As a result, it's sometimes difficult for the associations to find common ground on which to build deeper alliances.

Athletic

Like the Big Ten, many athletic conferences have looked for ways for their member institutions to collaborate on academic and business ventures. The success the Big Ten Academic Alliance has enjoyed, however, makes it an outlier among its peers. Using athletics as a vehicle for academic collaboration has its share of drawbacks. For one, the membership of the major conferences has become much more fluid in recent years as some institutions jump ship for more lucrative partnerships. And the groups are formed with **athletics at the forefront and sometimes include institutions of varying quality and divergent academic and research agendas.**

"You cannot go at it by thinking that the world stops at this campus. No university is self-sufficient."

Joseph E. Aoun, president of Northeastern University²

Although these historic collaborations in higher education will likely endure, a new and potentially more dynamic version of partnerships centered around common problems is emerging, bringing with it the opportunity to forge deeper alliances among institutions and remake higher education for the demands of the 21st century.

One early version of this new kind of partnership was used to build and deliver Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) through alliances like Coursera and edX. Each partnership brought together dozens of colleges and universities. In many cases, these were institutions that compete on every other level—for students, faculty members, foundation grants, and federal research dollars. But in these cases they ended up cooperating to build platforms to offer free online courses to the masses.

This paper is about the ways that institutions could, and the reasons why they should, move toward a more networked model to build strength and bolster the individuality they hold dear. My hope is to outline a path forward for a new era of cooperation in higher education through deep alliances and collaborative platforms around nearly every function on a campus from admissions to academic affairs to career services.

I call this new type of collaboration the **Networked University.** Over the past few decades, using fiber optic wires and wireless signals to create on-campus networks has become ubiquitous and essential. Now we need a new kind of network, one equally essential but with a wider reach, linking multiple institutions to create new models of higher education. We can't afford to wait.

**1900**

The Association of American Universities (AAU) is founded in Chicago with 14 of the nation's leading Ph.D.-granting institutions to consider "matters of common interest relating to graduate study."

**1918**

Fourteen higher-education associations form an emergency council to ensure the United States has enough technically trained military personnel for World War I. First named the "Emergency Council on Education," the name is changed later in the year to the American Council on Education (ACE), which eventually becomes the umbrella group representing higher education institutions.

**1925**

The Claremont College Consortium is born in California to provide the small college experience with the resources of a large university. Today, seven educational institutions constitute The Claremont Colleges: Pomona College, founded in 1887; Claremont Graduate University, 1925; Scripps College, 1926; Claremont McKenna College, 1946; Harvey Mudd College, 1955; Pitzer College, 1963; and the Keck Graduate Institute of Applied Life Sciences, 1997.

**1954**

The Ivy League is formed as an official athletic conference, though the term had already been in use to describe the eight schools that are members of the association and as a proxy for elite higher education in the U.S.

**1957**

The Big 10 athletic conference, founded in 1896 and the oldest of the collegiate athletic conferences, forms the Committee on Institutional Cooperation as an ongoing effort to discuss academic and research matters and share best practices among member institutions.

**1965**

The Five College Consortium is formally established in Western Massachusetts. Includes Amherst, Mount Holyoke, Smith, the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, and Hampshire, that together share library resources, campus transportation, and some courses and academic programs. The consortium becomes the model for institutional collaboration among campuses located in close proximity.

**2012**

The Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Harvard University form edX to offer free massive open online classes (MOOCs) and ask other institutions to join the effort. Eventually, more than 70 colleges and universities offer courses on the platform.

Why the Networked University and Why Now?

For much of its history, higher education was a local and regional business. Students for the most part went to a college or university close to home, and faculty took jobs where they completed their Ph.D. or at institutions nearby.

Beginning in the 1960s, according to research by Stanford University economist Caroline M. Hoxby, a “re-sorting” of higher education started to occur. Guidebooks were published that allowed students for the first time to easily learn about colleges in other states (although the books were not on the scale or size we are accustomed to today). Over the next four decades, places that once seemed far away to most Americans became reachable by car, on discount airlines, or online, allowing more students to “go away to college.” Institutions of all types and sizes started to recruit prospective students farther away from campus.³

By the turn of the century, a proliferation of college rankings, led by U.S. News & World Report, allowed students and faculty alike to more easily compare institutions. That meant colleges needed to distinguish themselves not only from their counterparts in the next town, but also from those across the region, the country, and for the elites, worldwide. The result? A building boom, not only in physical buildings, but new academic programs, new research initiatives, and new faculty and staff to run it all.

In the first decade of the new millennium, construction cranes were ubiquitous on college and university campuses to build ever more luxurious residence halls, recreation centers, hi-tech classrooms, and state-of-the-art research facilities. For many institutions, much of that construction was financed by debt. The amount of debt taken on by institutions between 2000 and 2012 nearly doubled, to more than \$300 billion today.⁴

Academic programs also multiplied. In 2010, when the U.S. Education Department updated its list of academic programs used in various higher-education surveys, more than 300 majors were added to a list of 1,400 from a decade earlier. A third of the new programs were in just two fields: health professions and military technologies/ applied sciences. The 1990s saw similar growth in the number of majors. Indeed, nearly four in ten majors on the U.S. government’s list today didn’t exist in 1990.⁵

Of course, much of this spending was passed on to students in the form of higher tuition rates. Since 2000, tuition and fees, including room and board, at private universities has jumped by 47 percent, when adjusted for inflation, and by 71 percent at public institutions.⁶

The rising cost of U.S. higher education is simply unsustainable, especially given the growing inequality of living standards worldwide and the lagging incomes of college-going families. The question now is, after decades of talking about reining in costs, how can institutions actually achieve real savings?

“There is no natural constituency for cost control on campuses,” says Lawrence S. Bacow, the former president of Tufts University. “Universities compete by advertising their inefficiencies—small classes, lots of hands-on experiences, the intimacy of the student experience. We tell students to come here because we’re essentially the most labor-intensive provider.”

Potential Impediments to the Networked University

There are plenty of hurdles to deeper academic alliances among universities, but among the primary barriers:



Accreditation

Sharing of courses and faculty between institutions might require an accreditation review by regional or specialized accreditors.



Tenure

For cost savings to be achieved through course sharing or even department sharing, individual institutions in the alliance would need to eliminate faculty positions. That would be difficult, if not impossible, if those are tenured positions, and it's unlikely departments or schools would give up tenure-line positions without a fight.



Shared Governance

Faculty Senates will want to weigh in on any alliances that touch academic affairs.



Rankings

Some higher education leaders pay close attention to the rankings, and might be unwilling to partner with institutions with lower rankings than their own institutions.



Financial Considerations

The success of the Networked University depends on students seamlessly moving between institutions. If money needs to change hands between institutions that might make it more difficult for students unless the financial systems between campuses are aligned.

According to Bacow, even trustees with a fiduciary responsibility to the viability of the institution are driven by their pride to continue to build its capacity. "Given a choice they would much rather solve budgetary pressures by solving the revenue side—more fundraising and tuition—rather than the cost side."

Unlike in other industries where competition typically drives down costs, in higher education it drives up costs. Few colleges want to be seen as "stepping away from the herd in meaningful ways" because they are so obsessed with moving to the next level, according to the late J. Douglas Toma, writing in the 2012 book, *The Organization of Higher Education*.⁷

As a result, U.S. colleges and universities "are eerily similar in vision," Toma argued, despite the fact that higher-education officials always extol the virtues of the diversity of American institutions. "Their common goal is legitimacy through enhanced prestige," he wrote. "Prestige is to higher education as profit is to corporations."⁸

But gaining any substantial ground in the race for prestige is getting more difficult for the vast majority of higher education institutions. Count up the college presidents who have said over the years that they wanted to move into the top tier of some ranking, and you'll find at least

fifty schools trying to fit into twenty spots. The truth is that the list of the best colleges and universities in the United States has remained virtually unchanged for the last century. What's more, the universities at the very top are pulling away, even as there are more institutions chasing them from below with each of them spending more money every year to catch up.

Take research spending, as an example of the rich getting richer in higher education. Universities believe that ranking high on the list of institutions receiving the most federal research dollars is a sign of prestige and helps attract star faculty and even more grants. As a result, some universities have spent student tuition dollars to gain an advantage, hoping that they could leverage their own funds to secure more federal grants. Around a quarter of the top hundred universities on the federal research list have doubled their own spending on research in the last decade. But many efforts failed: Nearly half of these institutions ended up falling in the rankings.

In many ways, higher education now mirrors trends in society as a whole: there is a greater concentration of wealth among a small group of elite private and public colleges. Combined, the 20 wealthiest private universities in the U.S. hold about \$250 billion in their endowments, which accounts for a staggering 70 percent of all the wealth of private colleges and universities.

Wealth in higher education is likely only to become more concentrated in the coming years as the richest colleges raise money at a faster clip than anyone else. Among colleges that collected more than \$100 million in donations in 2016, fundraising has jumped by 22 percent over the last four years, according to Moody's Investors Service. Among those that raised less than \$10 million, donations went up just 4 percent.

Given these trends and the greater separation at the top, higher education leaders need to stop thinking that the only path forward is one that they take alone. Simply put, many institutions can't thrive, and some won't survive, without forming deeper academic partnerships.

A Need for Scale

Never before has the need for scale in higher education been more critical than it is at this moment. Increased spending has become problematic on many campuses because most colleges and universities expanded their physical plant and academic programs with largely the same undergraduate enrollment base that sustained them in previous generations. In other words, most institutions didn't increase their enrollment even as their costs swelled. (To bolster revenue, many did invest in growing online education and part-time graduate programs, but with mixed success.)

Some institutions even saw their enrollments decline, the result of unfavorable demographics in many regions of the country and the inability to discount their tuition rates enough to attract students. Overall enrollment has fallen by 3 percent since 2010 at institutions between 1,000 and 10,000 students. Which account for about half of degree-granting institutions in the United States. The falloff has been even larger at institutions with under 1,000 students, which account for 40 percent of the American market. These smaller institutions have seen their numbers drop by more than 5 percent.

The only group with sustained enrollment growth in recent years is institutions with more than 10,000 students. Yet such large universities have often been viewed with skepticism by academics because of the long-held belief that scale comes at the expense of quality and prestige. As Bacow pointed out, the rankings reward inefficiencies. Campuses essentially get higher marks for spending more money than their competitors and rejecting more students than they accept.

The idea that small equals quality, however, is not shared by elite universities worldwide. Compare the size of elite institutions in the U.S. to Canada, for instance. Canada's three most-prominent universities—the University of Toronto, McGill University, and the University of British Columbia—enroll a total of 117,000 undergraduates. That's more students than the top 17 American universities in the *U.S. News & World Report* rankings combined.

But attitudes about the size and scale of institutions in the U.S. seem to be shifting for two reasons. One, there is pressure on top schools to expand their capacity and enroll more low-income undergraduates due to concerns that wealthy students are clustering at elite institutions. Roughly one in four of the richest students in the U.S. attend an elite college, according to a recent study of federal tax records.

Two, there is evidence that greater size has resulted in greater efficiency at some of the biggest universities in the U.S. A 2013 report from New America found that the University of Central Florida, with more 55,000 undergraduate students and Arizona State University with more 41,000 undergraduates, for example, have median expenditures per student lower than research universities as a whole, even while maintaining the research output per faculty member of their counterparts.⁹

Many public universities can afford to get larger without damaging their quality, according to research by Robert K. Toutkoushian, a professor in the Institute of Higher Education at the University of Georgia. He has found that the size of an institution—up to enrollments of 23,000 undergraduates—does lower costs. Larger than that, and Toutkoushian found costs rise because of increased personnel on campuses to serve a larger student body. The mean enrollment of U.S. public universities is 11,400 undergraduates, so many institutions might have room to grow without a significant impact on their costs.¹⁰

Of course, not every institution has the ability to grow (i.e., public institutions in slow-growth states) or wants to expand to gain the efficiencies of size (i.e., small liberal arts colleges). The advantage of the Networked University is that such alliances can provide many of the benefits of size without expanding the student body of individual institutions. Much like competition defined higher education for much of the latter half of the 20th century and the beginning of this millennium, collaboration will define colleges and universities going forward. To this point, in a 2017 Gallup survey, 93 percent of chief academic officers said they would put a greater emphasis on increased collaboration with other universities in the year ahead.

Areas for Collaboration

The gold standard for the Networked University would be fully integrated campuses on all fronts, including academic programming. But if institutions cannot fully align their operations, there are individual areas where deeper collaboration is possible, such as:

Online education



Risk management



Mental health counseling



Academic advising



International recruitment, enrollment, and services



Student health services



Career service



Athletics



Legal affairs



To begin to imagine how the Networked University might work in practice, it's instructive to look to another industry that two decades ago faced similar challenges to those confronting higher education right now: the airlines.

Building the Networked University

In the 1990s, the airline industry was beset with problems: high labor costs, many competitors, limited route networks, and a business model that shifted with the winds of the global economy. Although some airlines had the capital to grow or merge, most were hampered in their ability to adopt an expansion strategy because of their debt load or government regulations.

Enter the idea of airline alliances. The so-called code-share agreements have created networks of airlines, with the three biggest being Star Alliance, SkyTeam, and OneWorld. Under the alliance agreements, the airlines cooperate on departure times and routes, share airport facilities, and have reciprocal frequent-flier benefits. In some cases, the agreements, which are reviewed by the federal government to avoid antitrust concerns, are precursors to outright mergers.

International airline alliances were among the most significant advances for the airlines in the 1990s. Researchers have estimated that profitability rose, ticket prices fell, route networks expanded, and productivity increased because of the alliances.¹¹

Strategic alliances, of course, are not unique to the airlines. Every year, there are about 2,000 new strategic alliances in the world, according to the Boston Consulting Group, and alliances have been growing at a rate of 15 percent annually.

“Alliances can be an extremely effective way to embrace new strategic opportunities, pursue new sources of growth, and contribute to the upside of the business,” according to the Boston Consulting Group. “They are particularly useful in situations of high uncertainty and in markets with growth opportunities that a company either cannot or does not want to pursue on its own. One of the main reasons to engage in an alliance (as opposed to a merger or acquisition) is to share risk and limit the resources a company must commit to the venture in question.”

A New Era for Higher Education Alliances

In higher education, collaborations are no longer limited to colleges in close proximity. Advances in technology can now link together institutions that are separated by thousands of miles. Under the alliance model, groups of colleges could align their course catalogs each semester, much as airlines do their schedules each travel season, so that not every institution in the network would need to offer courses that only a few students on each campus might need to complete a degree.

Two events over the last decade have brought the need for this new type of collaboration in higher education into sharp relief.

First was the Great Recession of 2008. Within months of the global economic crash, the largest university endowments shed billions of dollars, and massive deficits opened in state budgets, leading to unprecedented budget cuts at schools of all kinds and sizes, even elite institutions such as Duke University, Harvard University, and the University of California at Berkeley. The ripple effects of the recession lasted for years on campuses, and in some places have never quite dissipated.

Second was the rapid increase in knowledge and information combined with explosive growth in computing and network power. Advances in the academic disciplines, the emergence of new fields, and technology with the capacity to augment and supplement human teaching and make a variety of learning models scalable has made it difficult for even the most nimble of higher education institutions to keep pace.

Combined, these two forces have led institutions to form higher education alliances in the past few years unlike those of the past several decades. These new alliances include the University Innovation Alliance, the American Talent Initiative, and Unizin, among others.

The seeds of these new alliances are planted in a common set of problems that campuses need to solve but cannot do so on their own because of their size or lack of financial resources. They are less transactional than the legacy coalitions—in other words, they not formed simply to share purchasing or best practices—and are more strategic in their approach to solve some of higher education’s knottiest problems, such as access, retention, completion, and engaging students in a digital age.

The Problem Solvers

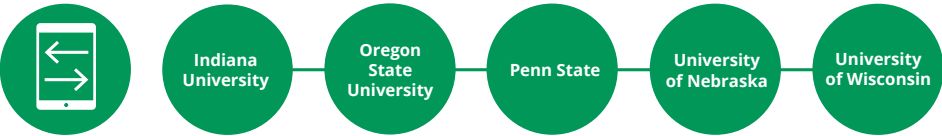
Unlike previous attempts at collaboration that were transactional, or designed around mission or geography, some of the new alliances emerging in higher education are focused on problem solving.

Unizin | Founded: 2014

Problem to solve: To contract for, integrate, and operate shared digital services and provide common infrastructure that simplifies collaboration between colleges and universities.

Exemplar work: Three universities in the alliance, for instance, worked together to migrate course content across their learning management systems.

Member institutions: 11 including:

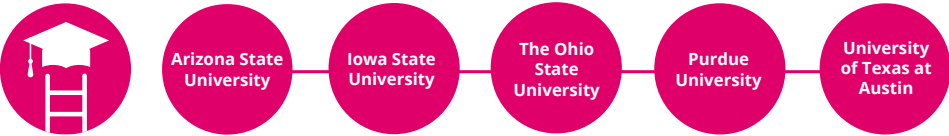


University Innovation Alliance | Founded: 2014

Problem to solve: To make quality college degrees more accessible to underrepresented and low-income students.

Exemplar work: The UIA's first project was to scale the use of predictive analytics from three campuses in the collaboration to now nine campuses. With the help of a grant from the U.S. Education Department, the Alliance is conducting a randomized controlled trial using 10,000 students to measure the effectiveness of advising programs based on data analytics.

Member institutions: 11 including:

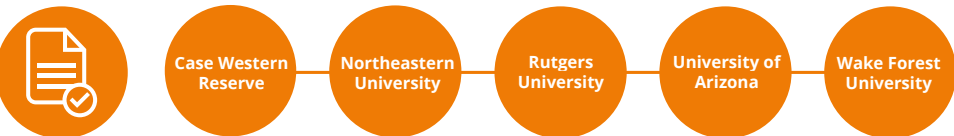


Coalition for Access, Affordability and Success | Founded: 2015

Problem to solve: To improve the college application process by providing a single, centralized toolkit for students to organize, build, and refine their applications to numerous institutions.

Exemplar work: A key feature of the Coalition's toolkit is a "locker" that allows students to store their work throughout high school and share it as part of a portfolio with colleges and universities during the admissions process.

Member institutions: More than 90 including:



American Talent Initiative | Founded: 2016

Problem to solve: To enroll more low-income students at selective institutions.

Exemplar work: Beyond setting aspirational goals, such as educating 50,000 more low-income students by 2025 at the member institutions, the schools are also sharing best practices and publishing research on promising strategies for increasing the enrollment and success of low-income students.

Member institutions: 68 members including:



Perhaps most important, these new innovators are drawn from across the spectrum of higher education—from private universities to community colleges and from land-grant institutions to liberal arts colleges. They are unified not by institution type, but by the presence of forward-thinking leaders who are willing to challenge the status quo and support the development of new models of program design and delivery.

Unfortunately, because they are not united by region, institution type, athletic conference, or any of the other structures that have traditionally brought institutions together, no forum yet exists for innovative college and university presidents to share ideas and identify areas for collaboration. No mechanism exists for them to speak with a shared voice, and this has limited the ability of the innovators in the sectors to serve as role models and catalyze broader change.

"These gigantic membership associations determined largely by topology or status are ineffective in this day and age because many of those institutions have radically different business models now," said William F.L. Moses, who serves as managing director of the Kresge Foundation's Education Program. "A new type of association is needed in higher education."

A Variety of Approaches

No one approach will define the Networked University. A variety of strategies could be employed by institutions looking to build new alliances. They could be formed to tackle a discrete problem (i.e., Title IX enforcement), issues on several fronts (i.e., lack of enrollment for critical languages, skyrocketing acquisition costs in the library, and a need to improve career services), or the alliance could be a model of deep inter-institutional cooperation (as I'll outline in the example on pages 30–31). The size and scope of the alliances will depend on the problems they seek to tackle and the willingness of the institutions to navigate the ambiguity that comes with any new partnership.

Although there will be a variety of approaches, in the interviews I conducted for this paper, officials were united in their assertion that a key bellwether of success would be having common goals among partners beyond just saving money. Strategies that strengthen the core of the institution by giving faculty more resources for teaching and research or to promote student success were common themes mentioned by officials as to why partnerships succeeded in the past.

How to Begin Building the Networked University

In thinking about how to start the foundation of the Networked University, consider a three-step process:

1. First harvest the low-hanging fruit

Deep academic collaborations are not going to be the first step in a successful partnership. Institutions need to date before they get married. Test out partnerships with small experiments based on complementary strengths that can be later scaled. For example, course sharing might start in departments with low enrollments at a group of institutions.

2. Set the conditions for more long-standing and deeper partnerships

Institutions choose partners based on the importance of shared vision. Developing deeper partnerships begins with a shared trust and a history of cooperation in an institution's DNA. The good news is that 85 percent of campus leaders report that they have engaged in some type of collaboration, albeit with numerous challenges and varying levels of success.¹² Trust, however, is not built overnight and change can often face internal resistance.

Various campus constituencies from faculty members to students need to be prepared for change. Officials need to make the case for the Networked University with trusted and verified data and a clear and aspirational vision about why such a collaboration is necessary to help the institution in the long run.

Those first two steps might take several years to achieve in an era when many institutions don't have the luxury of time given the pressing issues they are facing. But without a strong foundation for the Networked University, the third step is likely to be difficult to achieve.

3. Develop a strategy for sustainability

The long-term life of the Networked University is dependent on its individual parts. Sustaining the benefits of a partnership for more than a few years was often cited as a reason why leaders are reluctant to pursue deeper collaborations in the first place. An infrastructure needs to be constructed (i.e. governing board, key performance metrics that must be met annually) to maintain the Networked University beyond the tenure of a specific president or group of influential leaders.

It's easiest to imagine what one version of the Networked University might look through the eyes of a student. We'll call her Olivia.



The Networked University: The Student Experience

- 1 Olivia submits the common application to the University of New York, which belongs to a networked alliance of universities committed to providing a better academic experience to students at a more competitive price point. Before the university joined the network, an ever-increasing number of applications had swamped the admissions staffs. The network centralized the process and updated their tools, easing the administrative workload and allowing the network institutions to focus their admissions efforts on providing students with guidance and information. Olivia quickly learns that she has been admitted to the university, and will have access to resources throughout the alliance.
- 2 Before Olivia arrives on campus, she registers for classes using a single shared portal that allows her access to courses at UNY as well as the eight other institutions in the consortium. She doesn't need to worry about transferring credits or paying tuition to other universities in the network when she does this because they are now leveraging shared registrar and financial systems. The portal offers her a mix of course delivery options, including face-to-face, online, or hybrid courses, and she is able to get a flavor of each of the offerings through the portal. Once she has made her decisions, she is able to immediately access her course materials.
- 3 The process of taking multiple classes on different campuses is seamless for Olivia. Through the same portal she used to register, she is able to track progress across her courses. And, if she starts to fall behind, she receives personalized early alerts and support. Olivia finds that she particularly enjoys blended courses where students across campuses are able to take part. Because the institutions in the network have been able to leverage their collective buying power to build state-of-the-art virtual classrooms, engaging, real-time, synchronous discussions are now possible across distance.



- 4 As a sophomore, Olivia undertakes an undergraduate research project in sociology with one of the leading scholars in the field who teaches at another alliance institution. Communicating with the professor 2,500 miles away is made easier through a shared network and library resources.
- 5 When Olivia runs into trouble one night with a new concept in her statistics class, she starts a chat with the on-demand virtual tutor built into the class platform. Olivia's professor discovers through her morning digital insights report that half the class struggled with the same key concept. She reaches out to her statistics colleagues across the network for suggestions, and uses a new teaching technique to review the concept in class.
- 6 In her junior year, Olivia is offered an internship at Ford in Detroit. She jumps at the chance, and because one of the universities in the alliance is located nearby, she can keep up with her course work in person and take a few classes online at the same time.
- 7 In her final year, Olivia attends a virtual career fair where she is able to access opportunities from thousands of employers, many of which are connected to the network's vast alumni population. During the fair she learns that the network has negotiated with some of these employers to create pathways through which graduates can continue their education as they begin their professional career. Olivia ultimately lands a job where a portion of her first year will be dedicated to completing an online master's program.
- 8 Olivia graduates from the University of New York with one of its diplomas, and the support of eight other institutions. As Olivia progresses through her career, she is able to return to the network time and time again to support her lifelong learning.

Breaking the Barriers to Change

The opportunities for the Networked University are immense. Eventually, academic alliances might allow colleges to pare back small departments so that there is little overlap between colleges in the network. Students could start at any campus in an alliance but have access to a much more robust collection of courses. Individual colleges could put most of their academic resources toward making a few academic programs distinctive and leave the rest to their partners. And not everything would need to happen virtually. The networks could allow for the free flow between campuses of faculty members and students, who might find research projects or internships more readily near some institutions than others in an alliance.

Unfortunately, the hurdles to creating deep and sustainable academic alliances are also significant. “You really need a coalition of the willing,” Moses of the Kresge Foundation told me. “There is a certain pride in higher education that is hard to overcome—that all good ideas must be invented on campus.”

Barbara McFadden Allen, who recently retired after 16 years of leading the Big Ten Academic Alliance, said she is unsure the group would exist in this current higher education environment. “The Big Ten didn’t do much on the academic side in those first years of its existence, but trust was built during that time that paid off later in what we did,” Allen said. Today, today the world is moving at a much faster speed and there is not often time for institutions or their leaders to spend precious bandwidth setting the foundation for an effort that might pay off years down the road.

For the Networked University to mobilize, grow, and flourish, five key components are necessary:

Presidential leadership

This is especially true for an alliance with the goal of tackling campus-wide issues. Without top leadership involved in the creation of an alliance, any effort is likely to be limited in scope. Presidents need to have a stake in the success of the alliance for it to be sustainable. They need to find partners based partly on complementary strengths but also personal comfort level. It’s also helpful if the collaboration includes at least initially a small number of institutions that don’t directly compete.

A core and dedicated team focused on the initiative

While the Networked University needs to start with presidents, operations must be assigned to a team of dedicated individuals on campuses who work on nothing else. Too many good ideas and projects fail on campuses because they have only one champion, who might move on to other projects or leave the institution for another job, or because they are assigned to staff members who already have a full-time job. Dedicating campus personnel to the initiative also gives its member institutions skin in the game.

A problem to solve with a specific project

Alliances built around a vague concept of shared interests will quickly dissipate. The University Innovation Alliance succeeded early on because its leaders agreed that retention was a priority problem on their campuses. They chose as their first cooperative endeavor a project on predictive analytics, with the idea that the massive amount of historical data colleges collect on students can and should be used to help those who need help the most. Several universities in the Alliance were already actively using predictive analytics, none more so than Georgia State University, which took the lead on the project for the entire group. By the end of the first year, nine campuses were using predictive analytics (up from three originally).

Incentives to change

Inertia and the status quo are strong countervailing forces to any changes on campuses. Without strong incentives to build the Networked University, it will never get off the ground. Such incentives could include funds from foundations or governments, partnerships with companies that agree to jointly develop new products with the member institutions, or even something as simple as a spate of positive publicity around the concept of a collaboration.

Measurement of success

Many new initiatives end up failing because they wait too long to measure their results, allowing skeptics to shape the narrative about the efficacy of the project. Any collaboration must set intended outcomes, document problems as they arise, and measure results with data, not simply anecdotes, especially as those organizations funding such efforts constantly ask about their return on investment.

The Path Forward

The decades ahead promise to be tumultuous ones for higher education. Federal and state dollars remain constrained, family incomes are stagnant, and the demographics of the student pool are changing, all meaning that their financial needs are greater than ever before. Institutions can no longer simply pass higher costs on to students. The evidence is clear that increased tuition discounting and missed enrollment targets in recent years means that students are unwilling to always pay higher tuition prices. For the last decade, access was the most critical issue facing the future of higher education; now bending the cost curve is the most important issue to tackle.

Many institutions are still approaching these trends by simply hoping they will pass in short time and they can survive. But the next era in higher education should be about more than survival. Given the growing needs for a post-secondary education around the world, the era in front of us must be defined as one of growth through change and cooperation rather than retrenchment.

When Bridget Burns, the executive director of the University Innovation Alliance, was building the case for the group's formation, she traveled to dozens of campuses across the U.S. asking leaders how their peers or nearby institutions were tackling critical issues.

"For the most part, they didn't know," Burns told me. When they did go looking for ideas, they were likely to call their counterparts at other institutions for advice or hunt for ideas at conferences. "They fall back to what's comfortable and easy without ever knowing if they're even following the right strategy."

This haphazard approach to innovation no longer works in an era when higher education is facing immense challenges. The most elite and the wealthiest institutions in the U.S. are pulling away from everyone else because they have the financial resources at their disposal and they are able to recruit the best students from around the world. At the same time, the largest public universities are enjoying the benefits of scale that enable them to pursue opportunities to improve teaching and learning and better position their institutions for the future.

Most other institutions, however, lack deep pockets, or scale, or both. So to survive and thrive in the decade ahead, these institutions will need to follow a path of growth, either by growing on their own or securing the advantages of scale through collaboration.

The Networked University will allow individual institutions to maintain, and perhaps even strengthen, their independent missions and keep their own identities while building a platform for solving some of higher education's toughest problems. The seeds of the Networked University have already been planted with collaborations such as Unizin, the University Innovation Alliance, and the American Talent Initiative. The question now is which pressing problems are best solved through cooperation and how do we build more alliances among institutions to begin tackling those issues.

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Notes

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