

The Cooperative Edge

Turning institutional collaboration into institutional strategy

By E. LeBron Fairbanks

Mount Vernon, Ohio

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Mount Vernon Nazarene College, (MVNC) a private liberal arts college sponsored by the Church of the Nazarene, was recently identified as Ohio's second-fastest-growing private higher education institution of the decade. In 1991 enrollment was 1,044. In fall 1999 it was over 1,984.

Our sustained growth is due in significant measure to our leadership team's commitment to making institutional collaboration an institutional strategy. In fact, in recognition of just how significant our collaborative projects have been, the MVNC Board of Trustees included in our new strategic plan an initiative on institutional collaboration. Adopted at the fall 1998 annual board meeting, the plan's Strategic Initiative No. 9 reaffirms our board's belief that strategic collaboration will distinguish and strengthen higher education institutions like MVNC for continued growth, maturity, and excellence even as we move into the next decade.

Our commitment to institutional collaboration as institutional strategy has expressed itself in many ways, including the six accomplishments explained below.

Expanding the president's cabinet

1 To increase collaboration, a college must broaden participation.

I became president of Mount Vernon Nazarene College in 1989, having moved there from the presidency of the Asia-Pacific Nazarene Theological Seminary in Manila, Philippines. In 1990 my cabinet consisted of just three persons, including me. Today the cabinet has broadened to eight members, including senior administrators representing each of the college's administrative divisions and my senior staff.

The members of this expanded cabinet follow well-established steps to make our three-hour, twice-monthly meetings productive and efficient. The process begins when cabinet members submit agenda items to my executive assistant. Agenda items are assigned to one of three categories:

1. Items for information, which include facts about divisional personnel, program, and problem issues of which all cabinet members should be aware.
2. Items for discussion, which up the largest block of time in cabinet meetings. These items must be presented in the form of questions and "sponsored" by at least two cabinet members before they will be added to the agenda.

3. Items for decision, which are identified in the form of a statement that begins with “Recommendation that . . .” and which the cabinet must have addressed earlier as an item for discussion.

There are exceptions to this policy when emergencies arise. But generally we follow the cabinet policies and procedures outlined in our three-page “Guiding Principles for Senior Administrators,” which we review and revise every two years. The result of this expansion has been broader campus input as well as greater buy-in, both of which are essential to successful collaboration.

Restructuring the campus’s administrative divisions

2 Another way to increase collaboration is to put people who do similar jobs in close proximity. In 1990 the college created the Enrollment Services Division to bring together key campus personnel (except faculty) involved in recruiting and retaining what we call “graduates-to-be.” In addition to the admissions and student recruitment director, the division included the director of financial aid (later renamed student financial planning); the registrar (later named records and registration director); the retention director; and the academic support director. These individuals were relocated from different offices across campus to a building near the center of campus that also housed the student accounts office.

Later in the decade, the college merged the divisions of enrollment services and student development into one mega-division. If recruiting and retaining graduates-to-be really was our goal, then it only made sense to ensure that all personnel related to student success (except faculty) are at the table in divisional meetings to plan and pray together for students. We think the new division serves the students and the college beautifully.

Collaboration is a mutually beneficial and well-defined relationship entered into by two or more organizations to achieve common goals.

The relationship includes a commitment to: a definition of mutual relationships and goals; a jointly developed structure and shared responsibility; mutual authority and accountability for success; and sharing of resources and rewards.

From *Collaboration: What Makes It Work, A Review of Research Literature on Factors Influencing Successful Collaboration*; Amherst H. Wilder Foundation

Networking with other Church of the Nazarene campuses

3 Opportunities for collaboration often exist beyond a campus's own boundaries. Beginning in July 1995 and continuing through February 1999, the Church of the Nazarene's USA/Canada Council of Education entered a four-phase study funded by the Teagle Foundation in New York to develop a strategic plan for collaboration and networking.

Examining both collaboration theory and practice, the council's Subcommittee on Collaboration and Networking led the institutions' presidents in a process that would result in increasing strategic collaboration without losing the identity or independent governance already enjoyed by the 11 related colleges, universities, seminary, and Bible college.

Phase One of the process looked at models of collaboration, including examples from for-profit, nonprofit, higher education, and Christian higher education institutions.

Phase Two studied the functional aspects of collaboration, including shared programming, resources, and institutional advancement. A key component of this phase was a detailed look at technology and its current and future role in higher education.

Phase Three examined external forms of collaboration. These included relationships between the liberal arts colleges and universities, corporations, and theological institutions of the Church of the Nazarene. In addition, the present and future relationships among educational institutions overseas were surveyed.

Phase Four was a period of transition in which the participating institutions left the study phase and moved to carry out the recommendations and findings presented in this document.

One of the study's important findings is that collaboration is best sustained when it becomes a way of life. Collaboration, in varying degrees, is already a characteristic of Nazarene higher education. Senior administrators and faculty are currently working together on a number of initiatives. As a result of this study, however, the USA/Canada Council of Education has been strengthened by:

- Clearly defining the purpose and mission of the council.
- Clarifying the relationship between the USA/Canada Council of Education, the International Board of Education of the Church of the Nazarene, and the Education Commissioner for the Church.
- Formalizing the informal working relationships among deans, development officers, etc., into affinity groups. This will provide accountability and communication within the USA/Canada Council of Education and the proposed new entities.

- Creating an Association of Nazarene Liberal Arts Colleges and Universities. This strategic partnership formally seeks to strengthen the institutions' common mission through shared thinking and planning, collaborative resource development, and program coordination.
- Creating an Association of Nazarene Theological Schools. The association will allow member schools to pursue an avenue of collaborative relationships designed to benefit from and build upon institutional commitments to theological education.

As a result of these initiatives, presidents of USA/Canada Council of Education institutions will work together more deliberately and will encourage senior administrators to do the same through the various affinity groups.

Learning from other Ohio colleges about process redesign

4 By taking part in the Ohio Foundation of Independent Colleges' collaborative efforts since 1996, 23 have learned that there is a lot we can share with other campuses without "giving away the store." Our senior administrators have been active participants in each of five groups that have gone through Teagle Foundation-sponsored process-redesign workshops. A core team leader keeps process redesign in focus at MVNC.

The process-redesign workshops covered financial aid, accounting, admissions, registration, and the adult degree-completion program (called EXCELL). On our campus, those five workshops have produced over 35 initiatives (most completed at this writing, but some still in process) that have resulted in tangible improvements and cost avoidance.

For example, one measurable result has been a new purchasing-card system that has reduced small-purchase-order use by over 100 per month (with savings per transaction of about \$35 each), even as the number of transactions we processed has increased to over 300 per month. We have also learned from the other schools and are now implementing an online work-order system as well as a one-stop shopping concept with admissions, financial aid, and registration. In addition, collaborating with other like institutions has the potential to bring us significant savings in areas such as gas and electric deregulation and audit services. The improvements we make will enhance our value-to-cost ratio and improve the bottom line.

Taking part in the OFIC collaborative has proved that when we venture out of our comfort zone, we can "think outside the box" and see potential changes and benefits we never envisioned. An added bonus: Many of our employees now feel empowered because their ideas do count and the resulting changes do make a difference.

Forming practical partnerships and networking with local churches

5 Ministers, like doctors and lawyers, shouldn't stop learning and growing when they receive their degrees. That is why, early in 1998, a meeting was called for regional district and local church leadership in the Church of the Nazarene. The meeting included district superintendents, chairmen of the district board of ministerial studies or coordinators of continuing education, representative pastors, and faculty from the college's religion department.

The conclave began with a review of recent initiatives for ministerial preparation and continuing education, and with discussion of the viability and potential value of regional collaborations on these initiatives. Participants reflected on "what I didn't learn in college" as an exercise to illustrate the significance of continuing education and the need for increased personal involvement in equipping new pastors. These reflections will become the foundation for the directions we take in future regional efforts.

The following preliminary statements evolved from the discussion, which has continued in subsequent meetings and conclaves:

- Ministerial preparation must be a collaborative effort among local churches, districts, and educational providers.
- With the major portion of college ministerial training devoted to theological and biblical preparation, increased attention is needed to practical training and mentoring through partnerships with local churches and districts.
- A stronger relationship between districts and college faculty is mutually desired.
- Districts are keenly interested in working together as a region in designing a structure and flow to continuing education and ministerial preparation.
- Continued dialogue is vital in assessing what our people need to learn.

We must do the things we think we cannot do. The future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams. *Eleanor Roosevelt (1884-1962), Humanitarian, UN Delegate.*

MVNC's "Culture of Collaboration" project

6 As mentioned above, Mount Vernon has participated with commitment and intensity during the past four years in two Teagle Foundation-funded projects. These projects were designed to strengthen our resolve to build strategic alliances among the eight liberal arts colleges and universities of the USA/Canada Council of Education, the Church of the Nazarene, and selected members of the Ohio Foundation of Independent Colleges.

Much has been learned about collaboration during these studies. We've seen significant changes take place, particularly at the presidential and senior administrator levels, as we

have launched inter-institutional projects. Mount Vernon Nazarene College will never return to its former way of doing things “on its own.”

In fact, due in large part to the profound impact of the two Teagle-funded collaborative projects, the MVNC Board of Trustees, at my recommendation, determined that a strategic initiative on institutional collaboration was critical to our strategic plan for the next decade.

However, one key element in MVNC’s strategic initiative on collaboration was not addressed in the two Teagle-funded projects in which we participated. How do you develop a campuswide “culture of collaboration” involving not just the president and senior administrators but also the staff and, particularly, the faculty?

The resulting project, called “A Model for Creating a Culture of Collaboration at Mount Vernon Nazarene College,” is designed to address this question. For the project to succeed, four critical elements are necessary: (1) time for research and exploration of models; (2) senior administrative coordination of in-service programs, networking, and travel; (3) faculty and staff buy-in and participation; and (4) thorough documentation.

The project has a three-year timeline. Just as it has taken several years for the senior administrators and me to understand and embrace collaboration as a key component in institutional strategy formulation, so likewise it will require a similar period to bring the entire campus community to commit to and practice collaboration.

The project’s specific objectives are as follows:

- Appoint a cabinet-level administrator to serve as a counselor to the president and a resource to the cabinet to work with, among others, the Ohio Foundation of Independent Colleges and the US/Canada Council of Education to effect collaboration, networking, strategic alliances, and partnerships.
- Appoint a collaboration task force consisting of faculty and staff to identify, model and promote collaboration to the campus community, and to approve faculty and staff travel to selected institutions for on-site visits and consultation.
- Develop a reward system for faculty and staff who significantly participate in collaborative projects.
- Identify resource persons and select institutions capable of modeling and counseling MVNC regarding the processes of collaboration.
- Provide faculty and staff with technological support and training that will enable them to benefit from joint/multiple campus training, support, and networking.
- Identify no fewer than three specific activities to pursue, and develop an assessment measure to determine success.
- Educate, communicate, and celebrate with the campus community the processes, benefits, problems, and possibilities of intra- and inter-institutional collaboration.
- Develop and implement an annual benchmarking routine to compare MVNC’s external collaboration to (a) other Nazarene institutions, (b) other independent higher education institutions, and (c) other nonprofit institutions outside higher education.

- Develop a reading room/network laboratory for journals, books, and articles relating to the theme of institutional collaboration, particularly academic collaboration. Display examples of effective collaboration models through posters or media presentations (that is, on computer or video) and provide an experimental setting for faculty and staff to interact, plan, and produce (that is, to collaborate).

The result of this project will be the realization of our overarching goal: the development of a “collaboration culture” among faculty and staff and the necessary revision of our administrative structure/system to support, embrace, and pursue intra- and inter-institutional collaboration.

A benefit that’s secondary to us but of primary significance to the broader higher education community will be sharing the conclusions (as well as the processes) we used to create a model for a campuswide culture of collaboration at MVNC. The project will add both to the literature and the discussion in the higher education community regarding the imperative of and challenges to developing a collaborative culture, particularly at the faculty and staff level.

Mount Vernon Nazarene College is actively identifying ways and means to collaborate with institutions and agencies on mutually beneficial academic and administrative partnerships. Given the rising costs of both quality classroom teaching and student quality-of-life improvements, it is imperative that collaboration continue to serve as a driving force in institutional strategy for the next decade.

Factors Influencing Successful Collaborations

Factors related to the ENVIRONMENT

1. History of collaboration or cooperation in the community
2. Collaborative group seen as a leader in the community
3. Political/social climate favorable

Factors related to MEMBERSHIP CHARACTERISTICS

4. Mutual respect, understanding, and trust
5. Appropriate cross-section of members
6. Members collaboration as in their self-interest
7. Ability to compromise

Factors related to PROCESS/STRUCTURE

8. Members share a stake in both process and outcome
9. Multiple layers of decision-making
10. Flexibility
11. Development of clear roles and policy guidelines
12. Adaptability

Factors related to COMMUNICATION

13. Open and frequent communication
14. Established informal and formal communication links

Factors related to PURPOSE

15. Concrete, attainable goals and objectives
16. Shared vision
17. Unique purpose

Factors related to RESOURCES

18. Sufficient funds
19. Skilled convener

From *Collaboration Handbook: Creating, Sustaining, and Enjoying the Journey*, Amherst Wilder Foundation, p. 138.

Dr. E. LeBron Fairbanks is president of Mount Vernon Nazarene College in Mount Vernon, Ohio. The college, which is affiliated with the Church of the Nazarene, has 1,984 students.