

# Editorial

## **Emerging Models of Collaboration for National and International Distance Education**

Toward the end of 2002, a meeting in Washington, DC, addressed the question of what might be emerging “best practice” in how higher education institutions organize distance education, with a particular focus on what arrangements might be most promising in delivering international programs. Convened as a “Roundtable” by the Association Liaison Office for University Cooperation in Development (ALO), there was roughly equal representation of providers of distance education and of officials from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Setting the direction for the discussion, USAID’s Anthony Meyer conjectured that the failure of some distance education initiatives might be attributed to an insufficient business model or to the boundaries of institutional agendas being too difficult to overcome, or a combination of both. If this is so, it would be opportune to ask if there may be new and better ways of organizing distance education that are based on expectations of more interinstitutional collaboration. In considering this proposition, participants presented a number of cases, covering a range of experience from U.S.-based distance education programs in which collaboration of some kind had been attempted. As they explained and examined their different experiences, it became apparent that they had all, independently, developed a conceptual model of some kind to guide their practice. Five such models were presented and subsequently were given the following labels: Enabling model, Contractual model, Brokering model, Multiple Alliance model, and Commissioning model. The cases and details of the models (with an additional model not presented at the meeting labeled the Virtual Entity model) are reported in a document available from ALO (2003).

Examination of these models leads me to the conclusion that there is a high degree of agreement among their authors regarding the core issues to be considered in collaborative program development and delivery. There are interesting differences that boil down to being differences of emphasis, and together the set of models covers a wide range of policy options, each of which is likely to be the best guide for practice under a particular set of contexts and circumstances.

These differences of emphasis include the following:

Whether collaboration has to be voluntary or based on formal contracts.

Whether emphasis is on collaboration among institutions or emphasis is on mixing both institutional and individual collaboration.

Whether the aim is development of specific programs of courses and formal instruction of those courses, or establishing a general enabling network, with unstructured collaboration among individuals and institutions being a goal in itself.

Whether management is one of tight central authority or relatively loose coordination of multiple partners.

In some models, emphasis is on a single institution designing courses for delivery by collaborating institutions, whereas in others, emphasis is on cross-institutional design, or at least its potential.

Emphasis in some models is for the central institution to certify accomplishment by students and in others for each collaborating institution to certify its own students.

Emphasis is generally on students not interacting across institutions, though in some models it may be allowed.

Emphasis regarding quality assurance is reserved for the central management unit in some cases and devolved to collaborating member institutions in others.

Most models emphasize the role of a single funding agency; however, some emphasize multiple funding.

Some models give more emphasis to particular technologies and some emphasize technology selectivity and flexibility.

What some readers might discern in this ALO report is a generic model with a range of alternative applications, and these could provide valuable ideas about organizing resources for future program delivery, not only internationally, but nationally and also at the level of the individual institution. The models can also be recommended as a starting point for students and researchers looking to establish a theoretical framework for research in that most difficult and most badly needed area of research, namely research in policy.

Copies of the report can be obtained from ALO. See [www.aascu.org/alo](http://www.aascu.org/alo)

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**Reference**

The Association Liaison Office for University Cooperation in Development. 2003. *Strategies for U.S. developing country collaboration in distance education*. Washington, DC: The Association Liaison Office for University Cooperation in Development.