

*Establishing collaboration with schools as a strategic university priority encourages a variety of partnerships to grow. A synergistic network of partners also encourages collaboration within a metropolitan university and reinforces a distinctive institutional identity. This article recounts one university's experience, benefits realized, and practical lessons learned through school-college partnerships as a centerpiece of its strategic plan.*

# School-College Partnerships in Institutional Strategy

During the post-Sputnik decade of the 1960s, first as a chemistry professor and later as a science dean, I watched a great alphabet soup of promising curricular reforms (PSSC, BSCS, CBA, PSNS, ESS, etc.) go up in steam. In retrospect, their failure was painfully predictable: No matter how well schooled each year's crop of new teachers were, they simply couldn't make a difference as isolated junior colleagues among the multitudes of existing practitioners. If we truly wanted to see significant change in the schools within our lifetimes, we had to overcome the university's meager sense of obligation, which typically ended when its students graduated. Somehow, we would have to affect the teachers already in the field.

My response was to translate that global thought into local action, collaborating for several years during the 1970s with a colleague in the College of Education. Together we mentored a series of experienced school teachers who wished to redirect their efforts into science. We found that the abandoned experimental strategies of the era actually worked quite well, producing science specialists who quickly became influential leaders in the elementary schools of our community, despite the massive inertia that confronted them. I moved on to another state before their long-term achievements were evident, but they taught me a seminal lesson: Neither I nor my university colleague had all the answers. We knew science and pedagogy, but those teachers knew schools and students. When we valued the experience a teacher could bring to our interaction, we learned from each other, and our collective influence for change exceeded what any of us could do separately.

This lesson prepared me to welcome and encourage Academic Alliances, the local, informal analogues to county medical societies that began to appear in various disciplines

around 1980. This model of shared opportunity to teach each other promised to be a vast improvement over the one-way street of typical in-service training programs for teachers. At their best, alliances give school teachers a renewed sense of professional stature as valued members of a common enterprise, plus new knowledge to enliven their teaching. University counterparts refine their teachable knowledge and come to understand more realistically the conditions under which their students prepare for college. Despite their often dramatic effects on individual participants, however, such collaborations may have no more impact on school systems than traditional pre-service education. As long as they remain an isolated activity pursued by a scattered few, their effects on students are likely to be neither lasting nor pervasive.

However, the probability of significant change may increase in a synergistic network of partnerships, of which alliances are only one example. Prospects are especially bright when such collaborations are part of a coherent institutional strategy. This article describes a strategic approach to partnerships between schools and universities in the metropolitan context, including general lessons that may be applicable elsewhere.

### University Strategy in a Metropolitan Setting

The concept of organizational strategy blossomed in the academic world only a decade ago, and while "strategic planning" is too often devalued to a buzzword for whatever future prospect a person desires, it is decidedly here to stay. In a time of declining public understanding and support of higher education, cultivating a strategic niche has become important for all universities. This is especially true of metropolitan universities, whose very identity lies in close interaction with their surrounding communities. Indeed, the metropolitan university movement itself represents an attempt to define a new niche in the educational ecosystem.

"Comprehensive" universities suffer from a continuing identity crisis. Their very comprehensiveness has so diluted their identity as to leave them relatively invisible. Outside observers generally understand that private liberal arts colleges and local community colleges are primarily for teaching, and they hear constantly about developments that emerge, for good or ill, from flagship research universities. They don't realize that metropolitan universities share characteristics with both these extreme types and cover a great deal of educational territory between them.

One way to combat invisibility is to seek internal coherence and external recognition by cultivating "trademarks" -- prominent characteristics that give a university a unique identity in its state or region. Such identity requires a strategy that involves conscious, collective choices. In a helpful 1984 *Change* article, Marvin Peterson noted several characteristics of strategic choices, among them that they (1) link the university to its environment, (2) affect a large segment of the university, (3) require a substantial commitment of energy, if not resources, and (4) are virtually irreversible.

A serious effort to collaborate with surrounding schools in the creation of a high-quality, "seamless" educational system fits those specifications. Public (and, in some settings, private) precollege education is one of the most obvious components of any metropolitan university's environment. Both as consumers of its graduating teachers and as suppliers of most of its students, surrounding schools have an intimate, permanent connection with a university. A broad spectrum of university disciplines have counterparts in the schools. Coordinating and supporting multiple

partnerships takes time and effort, regardless of the level of funding or other resources made available. Finally, as may become evident from the account to follow, it is difficult, if not impossible for a university to slip out of the interdependency that results from a web of successful partnerships.

Maintaining an institutional commitment to school partnerships so pervasive that it drives university priorities does entail a hazard. Like strategic planning, "partnership" can readily become a mere buzzword. Some will recognize the direction of the political winds and inevitably appropriate the term for material or political advantage to whatever activity *du jour* they favor. The university community must keep reminding itself that it takes at least two reasonably equal parties to make a partnership. Projects in which university faculty simply teach school faculty something, or in which schools merely buy a service from the university are hardly partnerships in this sense. To build long-term relationships, there should be a contribution of time, effort, and expertise by each of the partners.

### One University's Strategy

The postwar expansion of American higher education fueled Weber State University's evolution from a modest two-year college serving the community of Ogden to a predominantly undergraduate, comprehensive university. Throughout its 105-year history, WSU has had an unusually close link with local residents; through acts ranging from farm produce donations to statewide petition drives, they have repeatedly mobilized to save the institution from economic or political demise. About 90% of its 15,000 students are drawn from the northern half of Utah's metropolitan core, where a million people live in a 75-mile-long strip centered on Salt Lake City.

Thanks to the high value Utahns have traditionally placed on schooling, Weber began to function as a normal school early in the century, and when it became a four-year college, teacher education quickly emerged as a prominent program. By 1970, it had gained international attention for its innovative competency-based approach, and a strongly positive relationship had developed between the program and neighboring school districts. Contacts with schools were limited, however, to faculty and staff of the College of Education, faculty from other departments who directly supervised secondary student teachers, and student recruiters in the Admissions Office.

In 1984, favorable circumstances triggered two ventures that marked the start of a new era in relationships between WSU faculty and surrounding schools. First, an unusually ample legislative appropriation permitted the creation of a Center for Science Education in the College of Science. Then, as word of the Academic Alliances movement filtered back from the annual conference of the American Association for Higher Education (AAHE), the Ogden Area History Teaching Alliance formed.

A more fundamental turning point followed in 1985, when a new president, noting Utah's weak economic prospects, taught WSU's administrative and faculty leaders to think strategically about positioning the institution to take advantage of limited state resources. Within a year, the prospects of a local recession and a temporary enrollment drop precipitated action on the developing plans, which resulted in self-imposed elimination of programs, consolidation of departments, and early retirement of over a hundred faculty and staff members. As WSU emerged from this brief crisis, the savings were reallocated to strengthen programs deemed strategically important.

This event not only demonstrated how serious the need for careful planning had become, but more significantly, it raised questions in the minds of faculty leaders about institutional mission. Like most comprehensive universities, WSU had spread itself thin, trying to be all things to all people, on campus as well as off. It was highly regarded by the surrounding community, but mostly as a one-way supplier of services. Without a clearly focused sense of mission there was a danger, as prospects began to brighten and suppressed creativity began to reemerge, of further frittering away opportunities in a mediocre attempt to cover all bases. For example, by late 1987, new partnerships were forming with geography and mathematics teachers, and the Early College, a program to enhance the senior year for bright high school students, had just opened; each of these initiatives was an individual effort, rather than a response to clear mission priorities.

Therefore, faculty and administrative leaders gathered in an unprecedented retreat during the Christmas holidays to begin a process of redefining WSU's mission. Subsequent months of give and take led to consensus that the university should build on existing strengths to cultivate three institutional trademarks -- areas in which WSU would seek to become the state's leading institution -- one of which was collaboration with the schools to influence the quality of precollege education. (The other two had to do with community economic development and individualized service to a diverse student body.) These aims were written explicitly into the new mission statement and became the basis for several of the university's specific academic priorities.

Public declaration of the strategic importance of school collaboration stimulated a variety of new activities, eventually totalling sixteen formally established partnerships. In keeping with WSU's informal style of strategic planning, which relies on incentives for voluntary contribution to publicly stated objectives, the provost and deans at first simply used the normal budgeting process and informal dialogue to guide developments. But as activities proliferated, it became necessary to hold quarterly meetings of the partnership coordinators with the provost as a means to share news, learn common lessons, and connect each other with resources. A part-time assistant provost position and a Deans Advisory Council were created to provide overall coordination of both educational and economic development partnerships. Within two years, the position evolved into a vice presidency for community partnerships, symbolizing the strategic importance of collaboration to the university. In recent years, the advisory council has worked with the university's Strategic Planning Task Force to review partnerships and advise the administration on priorities.

### **Varieties of School-College Partnerships**

WSU's sixteen formally established partnerships with local teachers and school districts, products of the initiative of individuals and groups of faculty, can be grouped conveniently into five categories.

#### ***A) Comprehensive Discipline-Based Resource Centers***

The Center for Science Education, WSU's original effort to reach out in unconventional ways to practicing teachers in the metropolitan region, grew out of my lingering desire to recruit more scientists to the task of improving schools. The Center has been maintained from the outset on hard money, with specific projects

receiving supplementary funding from federal, private, or internal sources. Local presence of the Thiokol Corporation's headquarters opened a productive channel to the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA). Out of this relationship, NASA selected WSU as its regional site for a Space Science Resource Materials Library for teachers, and its national resources fuel an annual two-day workshop for science teachers. The center has become host office for the Utah Alliance for Math, Science, & Technology. Among its many activities, the center has hosted the state science olympiad, offered frequent museum tours and planetarium shows, organized on-campus seminars for superior high school students, and maintained a science information hotline. Lately it has coordinated development by faculty of a new hands-on curriculum for future elementary teachers. Area teachers and school administrators are heavily involved in organizing such activities, and the center remains one of WSU's strongest links with Northern Utah schools.

In an instance of "diffusion by envy," the College of Social & Behavioral Sciences created a Center for Social Science Education, permanently funded and modeled after its counterpart in the natural sciences. A director was recruited directly from the faculty of a local high school. This new Center offers teachers a popular series of weekly seminars on current events, plus travel-study opportunities abroad. It also mobilizes campus international students as resources for local school faculty and supplies university faculty as speakers for community organizations.

### ***B) Academic Alliances***

The Ogden Area History Teaching Alliance, the Weber State English Alliance, and the Golden Spike Empire Language Association were launched as typical low-budget alliances -- modest in size, personal in character, and highly popular with participating teachers. All have organized summer workshops through grants from the university's faculty vitality fund or obtained from local school districts. All are run jointly by school and university faculty; the history alliance in particular has been as much an initiative of one local school district as of the university.

The Utah Geographic Alliance, as one of the first such groups sponsored by the National Geographic Society Foundation, has a correspondingly larger scope and complexity. WSU shared its sponsorship with Utah State University from the outset, and it draws teachers from surrounding parts of Idaho, Wyoming, and Nevada, as well as the entire state of Utah. School teachers are heavily involved in its structure and planning for such activities as an annual conference, multiple geography olympiads throughout the state, a regional Geographic Awareness Week recognized by the governor, opportunities for teachers to spend time at National Geographic headquarter, in Washington, and custom workshops for specific school districts.

### ***C) Technology-Based Networks***

The WEMATH network originated in the WSU Mathematics Department as an effort to improve upon classroom chalkboards through computer technology. In summer workshops, teachers first learned to program a computer, then developed their own original ideas for teaching aids. Sponsoring schools provided appropriate classroom equipment, and WSU made a library of the best software products available to all via modem. Midyear conferences allowed participants, who came from

all levels of school in Utah and surrounding states, to share experiences.

The Space Education Data Resource Center (SEDRC), comprising faculty from electronics, mathematics, and geography, organizes national workshops each summer, at which teachers learn to use satellite receiving stations. University students assist participants in installing and maintaining ground stations donated to their schools by the Federal Aviation Administration. The teachers then use the equipment to bring live and archived weather satellite transmissions and other data into the classroom, where students as young as elementary age learn to capture, manipulate, and interpret these images from space.

#### ***D) Teacher-Centered Programs***

The Teacher Academy was a product of Project 30, a national network of thirty institutions formed in the late 1980s to ally education faculty with arts and sciences faculty in improving teacher education at the local level. The academy combines recognition with professional development for outstanding teachers. Each year, school districts in the region select 45 of their best teachers in a particular subject area to participate as Academy Fellows, releasing them to participate in periodic activities organized by a joint university-school steering committee. The subject areas cycle through Social Studies, Science and Healthy Lifestyles, English, Mathematics, and Arts and Humanities every five years.

As an outgrowth of Writing Across the Curriculum, an activity involving nearly half of all faculty at WSU, members of the English and teacher education departments created the Collaborative Site-Based Teacher Training project. In a two-quarter immersion program, students receive all their professional training on location in schools, working with faculty from both university departments and with cooperating teachers in neighboring junior high and high schools. From the program's initial weekend retreat to a culminating classroom research project carried out collaboratively by master and student teachers, this is a team effort. From year to year it moves among nearby districts, both to give participating teachers relief from its intensity and to make the opportunity available to many.

For several years, the Educational Technology Initiative has been funded as a partnership between Utah government and private vendors to put computers into the public schools. Grants are given simultaneously to universities to develop model laboratories and software libraries and train both pre-service and in-service teachers to use computers effectively for instruction.

#### ***E) Student-Centered Programs***

Concurrent enrollment, through which students earn credit toward a high school diploma and a college degree in the same courses, has long been a popular concept in Utah. WSU's entry into this activity was through the Early College. Participants attend regular university classes in the morning and return to their home high schools for the afternoon. School districts are allowed to retain their full state funding, a portion of which is rebated to subsidize students' university tuition.

The Early College is a time-intensive program for university support staff, but it has greatly facilitated communication with high school counselors. As university and school staffs began to work more closely, it became possible to use the concurrent enrollment concept as a way to modernize traditional vocational instruction (rechristened "applied technology"), making career-oriented education an attractive alternative for more students. Now WSU collaborates with local high schools in

making university-credit applied technology courses available at high schools. University faculty and high school counterparts engage in cooperative workshops to insure equivalent content, expectations, and outcomes. Taking such collaboration a step further, applied technology centers in the metropolitan region have joined in articulating the "2 + 2" Tech Prep model. Precollege students can now earn university credit toward 75 university courses in seven fields, based on skills they develop in high schools or postsecondary applied technology centers.

The Honors Consortium for Academic Excellence is a parallel effort to recruit high-achieving high school students. It capitalizes on Utah's level of participation in Advanced Placement (AP) -- the highest in the nation -- by allying university honors faculty with high school AP teachers of 5,300 students in fourteen high schools. The Consortium supplies lecturers for AP classes, team-teaching opportunities for professors and teachers, library tours, and a quarterly Honors/AP Focus Night, where AP students can sample university honors seminars.

The Northern Utah Arts Consortium was created to extend the resources of both university and schools into the community. For a time, it operated a limited after-hours magnet school with offerings in music, drama, art, and foreign language; more recently, it has primarily served as a vehicle for musical instruction for young children.

## Outcomes of Collaboration

From my point of view as chief academic officer, WSU's strategic emphasis on partnership with schools has had a variety of effects on interactions among university faculty members, on the university's own sense of mission, on public perceptions of Weber State University, and on the professional lives of teachers in the surrounding community.

Probably the most significant outcome has been a spirit of collaboration that has solidified within the university. Deans of the arts, sciences, and education colleges have shared such tasks as organizing the Early College and the Teacher Academy. Arts and sciences faculty members have come to see themselves more clearly as teacher educators -- indeed, at least as crucial to the development of future teachers as their colleagues in the College of Education, who typically get into the process only after students' role models have been well established. This realization led to the university's participation in Project 30 and to the dedication of regular faculty positions in the English, mathematics, music, and visual arts departments to pedagogical specialists.

Interestingly, the same disciplinary orientation that seems to facilitate contact between professors and teachers poses a barrier to collaboration among the different partnerships. However, creating a formal communication pathway among their coordinators in the university has opened opportunities on occasion. Thus, the Science Education Center has obtained equipment through the Educational Technology Initiative; WEMATH and SEDRC faculty have discovered computer software useful to both; and the teacher network cultivated by the Collaborative Site-Based Teacher Training project has facilitated activities of the English Alliance.

Since WSU's 1988 mission redefinition, faculty clearly value collaboration with the community. Their relatively heavy involvement with community partnerships, compared with public university faculty around the country, became clearly apparent in results of the UCLA Higher Education Research Institute's 1992-93 survey of American college and university faculty. In 1990 the Utah State Board of

Regents restructured the Utah System of Higher Education, creating three categories of institution, differentiated by their special concentration on one or another of the three major academic roles. The flagship and land-grant universities emphasize research, the community colleges teaching, and WSU stands alone with its pervading sense of the importance of public service. The educational partnerships have contributed immensely to that sense of mission.

WSU, together with school districts and other partners, now organizes a biennial series of regional conferences patterned after the AAHE's National Conferences on School/College Collaboration. These serve as a vehicle to bring together educators, business leaders, and public officials in the inter-mountain West and to acquaint them with exemplary partnerships throughout the nation. Through its Utah Partnership for Educational and Economic Development, the state has been a pioneer in linking public schools with business and industry, and these conferences are proving an effective bridge between WSU's predominantly academic collaborations and the private sector.

The multifaceted assortment of WSU partnerships and alliances has drawn praise from such stakeholders as the State Office of Education, the Utah Legislature, and the State Board of Regents, as well as educators, trustees, and local community leaders. Perhaps the most enthusiastic contingent of community supporters are each year's 230 sets of parents of Early College students, who frequently share their deep gratitude over its redeeming effects on a child who seemed destined to waste a year of high school. Reinforcing WSU's reputation as Utah's innovative leader in finding new ways to improve education, the state superintendent of education called the Early College the premier example of successful concurrent enrollment in Utah. Both the Ogden Area History Alliance and the Collaborative Site-Based Teacher Training project have received the Utah Association of Teacher Educators' annual exemplary program award. Such recognition, the sort of reinforcement metropolitan universities covet, is certainly welcome at a campus historically overshadowed by three nearby, high-profile, research universities.

While similar evidence of direct benefits to teachers and students is desirable, such outcomes have proven to be the most elusive aspect of our partnerships. We know a good deal about activity levels and attitudes. For example, we know that the Center for Science Education has dealt with more than 10,000 teachers and students, 40% of them through its Science Information Hotline. We know that the foreign language alliance has been the vehicle to disseminate oral proficiency evaluation skills to high school teachers throughout Utah. We know that in the most recent year of the Applied Technology concurrent enrollment program, 17 university faculty mentored 93 school faculty in 16 high schools, who in turn served nearly 1,600 students. We've watched the geography conferences and NASA workshops for science teachers quickly grow to where they each attract several hundred teachers statewide. We know that, although historically WSU has not attracted its share of outstanding high school seniors, half of the Early College students now typically remain to continue their education. A systematic evaluation of the Early College by students, parents, and school administrators reflected overwhelmingly favorable attitudes.

I have mingled with participants in the Collaborative Site-Based Teacher Training Project and sensed their unusually high levels of energy -- and this on a Saturday afternoon -- commitment, and appreciation for the opportunity to interact with each other and with the student teachers. Inferences are easy to draw when a group of disenchanting secondary teachers will lead a wildcat strike one year, then devote

nights and weekends to each other and their student teachers in this project just a year later.

But there is little incentive for systematic evaluation of outcomes in programs that operate on the financial periphery, and data on student performance is correspondingly hard to develop. Such an information vacuum and the piecemeal nature of even a well-coordinated network of partnerships has driven AAHE to encourage communities to develop more broadly-based partnerships. So-called "K-16 Councils" are intended to draw together all of a community's educational resources and often its social resources, as well. Starting with a focus on information needs, this umbrella approach seems the next logical step for Weber State University's mission of service to its metropolitan region.

### Lessons for Metropolitan Universities

I conclude with a half-dozen personal lessons gleaned from Weber State University's decade of experience with school-college partnership:

**A game the whole family can play.** In an era when states perceive their universities primarily as gears in the engine of economic development, faculty members in the arts and sciences easily feel abandoned. Such feelings are strengthened in metropolitan universities, where student choice of major tends toward the professional schools. WSU, for example, awards well over three-fourths of all its baccalaureate degrees in technology, business, education, health professions, and social services. A strategic priority on supporting collaboration with school colleagues can return participating arts and sciences faculty members to a central role in their university's mission. Funding incentives and rewards consistent with announced mission priorities can provide strong reinforcement.

**No good deed goes unpunished.** One drawback of current public attitudes toward higher education is a single-minded focus on processing students through classes. State leaders fail to grasp that a collection of several hundred bright professorial minds can do far more for a community than merely teach students. But where a state's philosophy or funding formula is based solely on enrollment targets, this significant resource is dissipated. Internal allocation of hard money to partnerships exacts a price in the sweat of faculty and staff. To amass resources for significant collaborations, bootlegging must be elevated to a fine art within the university, and long-term commitments must be extracted from partner schools.

**Truth in administration.** A clear, publicly shared sense of priorities is an extremely valuable asset for university administrators. Morale generally rises when decisions are predictable, even if adverse. This effect is enhanced when the campus community has collectively created its sense of mission. At WSU, six years after a metropolitan mission was formalized, a strong consensus, if not unanimity, persists around its priorities. Monetary decisions driven by that common sense of priorities are easier to reach. Faculty members continually use internally funded professional development projects, including partnership activities, to implement the mission.

**Traffic engineering.** When added to a teacher education program's normal commerce with schools, a profusion of other formally organized partnerships creates a high potential for confusion, even collision. By the time WSU had a dozen of them in operation, there was a clear need for coordination and communication to avoid near-collisions in school corridors and trampled toes in school offices. While periodic meetings of the sixteen partnership coordinators and of the Deans Advisory Council are helpful, and an occasional newsletter can serve to keep campus and community participants informed, professional staff assistance from the office of the Vice President for Community Partnerships is an invaluable aid to communica-

tion and continuity between meetings.

**Nothing happens in a vacuum.** The concept of university strategy is meaningful only at the level of the whole institution. Presidents and provosts are in key positions to insure its widespread implementation. There are budgets to allocate, small-grant funds to administer, people with common interests to connect, activities to attend, private money to raise, state task forces and organizations to populate, memos to write, speeches to make, achievements to recognize, key external players to cultivate, and, not least, stimulating conversations to enjoy. Each such act done in a strategic state of mind can further the university's mission objectives.

**There's no substitute for dumb luck.** I have seen this rule operate so frequently, I now consider it my "first law of administration." When a particularly supportive local school superintendent rose, in turn, to state school superintendent, member of the State Board of Regents, and governor's assistant for education, WSU's partnership activities benefitted accordingly. When a local family had a million dollars to give away and an interest in family literacy, we were in a position to leverage the gift with federal funds acquired by a local school district to create an Even Start project together.

Clear and frequent communication among school and university professionals allows vital messages to be exchanged and acted upon in a timely fashion. For example, shortly after our foreign language department converted its entire curriculum to an oral-proficiency basis, I happened to have a casual conversation with a local school superintendent. He was bemoaning his district's loss of its funding for bilingual education, which created a crisis in one inner-city elementary school, where half the children were Hispanic and many spoke little English. Suspecting that foreign language majors could use an outlet for practicing their skills, I immediately connected the coordinator of our foreign language alliance with the appropriate school district official, who happened also to be a university trustee.

When I checked back with the district a few weeks later to see if anything had come of the suggestion, I was amazed to learn that nearly ninety undergraduate volunteers were serving each week as tutors to the elementary school children. Only a third of them were language majors; the rest, oddly, were all from the sociology department. Then I discovered that the program coordinator at the school district office was married to an energetic new sociology professor, himself Hispanic.

After a few high-profile university football players joined the project, it gained considerable media attention. By the second year, upwards of two hundred tutors were involved, and the program was being replicated at other schools. The striking rise in self-esteem and academic performance of disadvantaged children and the obvious satisfaction of their tutors transcended the language-proficiency problem that started it all. Bilingual education, which had fallen into disfavor, soon regained a high priority on the community agenda.

Such an anecdote illustrates what can occur when both school and university professionals are in the habit of acting as mutually supportive partners.

### ***Suggested Reading***

Daly, William T., ed. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning #24: College-School Collaboration: Appraising the Major Approaches*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1985.

Marvin W. Peterson. "In a Decade of Decline: The Seven R's of Planning." *Change* May/June 1984.