Chapter 10
eCampusAlberta:
A Story of Strategic Partnership and Collaboration Success in Distance Education

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ABSTRACT

eCampusAlberta is one of the fastest growing online consortia in North America. It currently provides over sixty credentials fully online to learners in hundreds of communities across Alberta, Canada. Developed in 2002, eCampusAlberta is a consortium of fifteen publicly funded colleges, polytechnics, and universities in western Canada. This strategic partnership was developed by senior executives across the institutions in an effort to increase access to online learning opportunities province-wide. The consortium leveraged existing networks of senior executive officers and informed leaders across the member institutions to build a framework to support the implementation of the consortium. Since its inception, eCampusAlberta has inspired collaboration across member institutes and has had a significant transformative effect on the post-secondary landscape in Alberta. To date, over 47,000 learners have participated in courses offered via the consortium.

INTRODUCTION

Through its collaborative partnership of fifteen publicly funded institutions (herein referred to as member institutions), eCampusAlberta has developed shared governance and services across campus presidents, senior academic officers, directors of distance education programs, and senior government officials. As it evolved, the consortium has experienced phenomenal growth in course registrations, course offerings and programs offered fully online and, perhaps most importantly, has effected organizational change across the post-secondary system.

As the consortium evolves, challenges of implementation have been replaced with challenges of scale, sustainability, and engagement at member

institutions. eCampusAlberta has been able to work closely with the provincial government to secure funds for online curricula development, core operations and raising awareness of the opportunities available online—yet the sweeping effect on the traditional business practices at institutions continues to require 'new' ways of thinking, 'new' solutions, and adapted business practices to support the overwhelming demand from students across the province. In just eight years of operating, annual course registrations have grown from an initial intake of 460 in 2003–04 (course registrations began in 2003–04) to 13,107 in 2009–10.

This chapter will highlight the development of this strategic collaboration and partnership and explore the experience of building a framework to support the implementation of the consortium. This story of success will include references to both provincial and institutional levels with specific examples of the experiences of a key member institute: Grant MacEwan University.

VISION SETTING: STARTING FROM THE TOP

In 2001, the presidents of Alberta's colleges and technical institutions approved the creation of a provincial system to co-ordinate online course delivery within a consortium framework in order to provide increased learner access. Alberta is a large geographic land mass with two major cities, and with approximately 30 percent of the population dispersed across more than 400 small communities throughout the province.

The presidents established a task team of Academic Vice Presidents (AVPs) from their institutions who had experience in distance education. In November 2002, the Alberta On-line Learning Association was created and later rebranded with the operating name of eCampusAlberta. An Executive Director was hired to develop and steer the consortium.

Initially, four institutional AVPs were charged with establishing a consortium framework for the province and began to deal with operational issues including the challenges of adapting their own institutional priorities and procedures to the new paradigm. The four members represented two large urban campuses and two smaller campuses and were chosen by their presidents to lead the initiative. Hawkins and Marcum (2002) would suggest that this new leadership approach is required when the partnership involves the re-conceptualization of the consortium mission within the institutional mission, articulating a vision, and forging the political alliances necessary to achieve the change required. This group later expanded to include representatives from across the province including northern, central and southern members.

Across the post-secondary system in Alberta, a culture of institutional autonomy and competition has historically been predominant. Consortium building for supporting access or distance education was not a new concept for the founders, yet introducing the partnership as an 'instant consortium' of fifteen institutions with a shared governance system was. The advent of the consortium served as a catalyst for conversations and collaboration at the system-wide level. Oblinger and Rush (1997) observe that innovation in higher education is largely the result of creating new institutions, not the adaptation of existing ones. With eCampusAlberta, the immediate and growing demand for increased access has had a transformative effect both system-wide and within institutions.

SHARED GOVERNANCE STRUCTURE: BUILDING THE FRAMEWORK

The shared governance structure consists of a Board of Directors, an Executive Committee, a Management Committee, an Operations Committee, an Executive Director with an administrative

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