

HOW CAN STATE COLLEGE USE PARTNERSHIPS TO

By Thomas L. Harnisch

“Partnerships” is an increasingly common word in the higher education lexicon today, particularly for public colleges and universities. With these institutions facing a diverse array of challenges, including eroding state funding, increased pressure to meet evolving workforce needs, and continual technological disruption—just to name a few—partnerships are one strategy public college and university leaders can use to advance their mission in today’s environment.

Partnerships are certainly not new to higher education, particularly AASCU institutions. They are, in fact, woven into the fabric of institutional missions. Nevertheless, their increased presence on the campus scene today poses new challenges for university leaders.

Because of the high stakes and growing role of partnerships on campus, AASCU convened a task force of current and former AASCU presidents and chancellors in June 2017 to inform the discussion by creating a guidebook for campus leaders. Entitled *Making Partnerships Work: Principles, Guidelines and Advice for Public University Leaders*, the guidebook begins by emphasizing the key role of partnerships in today’s public university landscape. However, it also stresses that pursuing new partnership opportunities does not mean public colleges and universities will compromise their integrity or mission. Rather, partnerships are simply a tool that campuses can strategically use to advance their missions in today’s environment.

Types of Partnerships

University partnerships are incredibly varied, ranging from small-scale collaborations with local school districts to ambitious public-private endeavors with decades-long obligations and millions of dollars at stake. The goals of these endeavors are as diverse as the partnerships themselves.

The guidebook documents three types of partnerships: community relationships, partnerships with other educational institutions and public-private partnerships (P3s). Community partnerships can have both economic and non-economic goals and many points of contact at all levels of campus. They are rooted in the state college and university commitment to being stewards of place. Alongside community partnerships, collaborations with other educational institutions are common in the public university landscape, including shared services arrangements with other campuses, alliances with the K-12 community, transfer agreements with community colleges, and agreements with universities around the globe. Lastly, P3s are a diverse category of partnerships that includes

agreements with developers to build on campus. P3s have played a key role in campus infrastructure today due to limited new state funding and the need to modernize campuses to meet today’s needs.

Benefits and Risks

Partnerships provide a variety of benefits. P3s, for example, can provide institutions opportunities to achieve campus goals on an expedited time schedule, produce opportunities for new revenue streams, and allow universities to outsource activities that are not central to their mission. In addition, the costs of campus development can, in some instances, be reduced through a partnership with a private contractor. Beyond P3s, partnerships can also provide new opportunities for research and learning for students and faculty, in addition to engaging the community in new ways that advance the mission of the campus.

While the expected benefits of a partnerships can be profound, college and university leaders also need to understand potential risks. Indeed, a partnership’s benefits often correspond to the level of risk involved.

A partnership that goes awry can be embarrassing at the very least, and at most can lead to state investigations, millions in losses for the institution, the end of a university presidency and an erosion of confidence in the institution. Further, partnerships today not only include parts of the campus that support the academic function—such as buildings and auxiliary services—but also are increasingly part of the academic function itself through contracts with online program managers and other academic collaborations. These partnerships raise new questions about academic quality and integrity at the core of the institution’s mission.

Because aspects of partnerships can be technical—particularly with P3s—college presidents need to consult experts from the beginning of the partnership process. Fundamental questions pertaining to the legality and ethical implications of the partnership, state and system rules and regulations, financial ramifications, and trustworthiness of partners remain essential to mitigating risks and appropriately vetting a proposal.

Principles for Success

The task force also outlined 16 principles for successful higher education partnerships in the guidebook:

1. Successful partnerships require a substantial investment of a president’s time.
2. Know why the institution wants to engage in a partnership.
3. Involve many stakeholders in deciding whether to pursue a partnership.

COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES CAN THEY ACHIEVE THEIR GOALS?

4. Be certain to consult with and inform all relevant boards.
5. Ensure that the partnership aligns with the institution's mission.
6. Understand the partnership's full effect on the institution.
7. Understand partner motivation.
8. Ensure that the partnership is well planned and adequately resourced.
9. Conduct due diligence in crafting every partnership agreement.
10. Be alert to a partnership's optics.
11. Follow through continually to ensure a partnership is conducted well.
12. Establish criteria for measuring results.
13. Remain flexible.
14. Communicate frequently about the partnership.
15. Plan for sustaining the success of the partnership throughout its lifecycle.
16. Have an exit strategy.

Along with these principles, the guidebook outlined key questions universities should consider throughout the partnership process. For example, for the first principle, the questions included the following:

- How much of the president's time will a university partnership require?
- Has the president committed to devoting necessary time to the project?
- Does the president have a trusted colleague who can manage operational implementation of the project, keep the effort on track and report back to the president and campus stakeholders regularly?

College and university leaders can use the principles and questions in the guidebook to lay a solid framework for future partnerships, including deciding whether the partnership is feasible and in the best interests of their institution.

Key Partnership Concerns

The guidebook found that legal issues, the policy environment and institutional culture are key factors that influence a partnership's success.

Understanding the law and working with university attorneys is key to building successful partnerships, particularly with the private sector. When multiple parties and significant financial sums are at stake, the need to consult legal counsel becomes even more important. Key concerns include laws pertaining to authorizing partnerships with the private sector, restrictions on the use of state assets, approvals from university governing bodies, and procurement protocols.

Alongside legal issues, the guidebook stresses that campus officials need to be leaders in creating a public policy framework that facilitates partnerships. Each campus operates in a unique policy environment, and college presidents and chancellors should collaborate with government relations professionals and other college leaders in the state to assess the policy landscape and offer recommendations to lawmakers for change. This can include local, system, state and federal policy and ambiguities that exist that can inhibit partnership development. Because policy changes can take months to years to occur, it remains essential to discuss policy issues well in advance of pursuing partnerships.

Lastly, the task force identified institutional culture as a key factor in partnership development. College presidents and chancellors can evaluate campus culture through a thorough accounting of existing partnerships and by examining campus policies and procedures pertaining to partnerships. This may include making partnerships a core component of the institution's strategic plan. Beyond this, campus leaders can start building a culture of partnerships on campus by recruiting faculty and staff with an interest in creating partnerships or those with a professional portfolio that includes creating and maintaining partnerships.

Partnerships remain foundational to the character and mission of AASCU institutions and will undoubtedly play a larger role in campus communities in the years ahead. As state resources have declined and the challenges confronting campuses and communities have become more complex, public colleges and universities cannot achieve their goals alone. However, they can choose to leverage their own resources and work in concert with other entities in the public, private and nonprofit sectors. Substantial risks remain, but this guidebook provides a useful series of principles, critical questions and strategies for campus leaders to consider as they seek to realize the full potential of partnerships and build communities that effectively meet the needs of students, faculty and other stakeholders. **P**

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