

DELICATE DIPLOMACY: Communicating with Complex Collaborations

By James C. Schmidt, with Maureen Schriener 

The new model of collaboration for public universities is complex, an interdependent web of relationships to shepherd major initiatives, to serve student and community needs, and to maximize scarce resources. It takes a lot of connections to click.

Case in point, the Confluence Arts Center rising in downtown Eau Claire, Wis., has grown in the decade since local visionaries proposed an arts center to what we endearingly call “the mother of all collaborations.” Confluence partners include the city, county and state governments; community, business and arts leaders; and the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire. Once the Confluence opens in 2018, connections will continue to expand.

The concept of public diplomacy fits well with the complex collaboration model. Relations among partners include the organization as a whole and also the individuals that make up those organizations. For example, in the Confluence project, our city and county boards agreed on public funds for the Confluence, but opponents forced a referendum vote. A grassroots pro-Confluence coalition won over voters. The connections clicked.

Communications is the glue that holds together collaboration connecting points. Here are key lessons we’ve learned about communicating with complex collaborations:

Leverage Your History

History offers important context for any university collaboration. We repeatedly talk about the Wisconsin Idea and our 100-year history as a reminder that the Confluence is a universal project, serving everyone. In historical context, the effort to provide our students with a new performance venue is bound in tradition. From the early 1900s, Eau Claire has enjoyed a cappella choirs, quartets and other musical performers. Our annual jazz festival has over 50 years of history, featuring performances ranging from international jazz artists to high school jazz groups. Most recently,

our community has become a hotbed of the indie music scene.

Historical context can determine potential partners. With the Confluence, our university had a history of trust with our partners. It would be challenging, to say the least, for a university to build a collaboration without strong, trusting relationships.

Seek Flexible Roles and Many Voices

A successful collaboration has a variety of leaders and advocacy from many voices. The diplomatic role for our university in the Confluence has been to garner support and encourage advocates. For the local referendum vote, community leaders, not the university, took the lead on the winning coalition.

A center for the arts was a tough sell to the Wisconsin Legislature, especially when University of Wisconsin System operational state funding was being slashed. But strong advocates from business persuaded legislators to support the Confluence. The founder of Jamf, a software company employing hundreds of people in Eau Claire, told legislators the Confluence would showcase Eau Claire’s arts culture, a crucial need in recruiting and retaining employees.

Flexible roleplaying requires setting aside egos. With the Confluence, we had explicit conversations about putting the needs of the project first. For example, due to budget and land constraints, design of the theaters inside the Confluence had to be reconfigured from initial plans. The creative compromise still gives us flexible, functional space.

Recognize Reality

There are innumerable pitfalls in complex collaborations. Recognize the reality of unexpected turns. To date, we’ve had over 60 public meetings on the Confluence project. Our rudder has been communication with consistent messaging, adapted to each situation and audience.

The reality check is also a “gut check” to follow your intuition. Early in the project, we were given advice to wait to communicate with elected officials. We should have followed our intuition to bring key constituents in early, but over time restored confidence with those partners.

The reality is not all collaborations succeed. Recognize when to be patient and persistent, or when to walk away. **P**



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