



Competing and Collaborating

April 10, 2012 - 3:00am

By [Mitch Smith](#)

The [Western New York Consortium of Higher Education](#) has been around -- in name, at least -- since 1967.

But the level of collaboration between the 21 member institutions in and around Buffalo was minuscule until a pair of grants from a local foundation enlivened the consortium in recent years.

With about \$150,000 from the Buffalo-based John R. Oishei Foundation, the long-dormant consortium, in 2007, started pooling resources and studying collaborations elsewhere. It then hired its first director and started holding regular events after receiving an additional \$500,000 in 2009.

The member colleges -- two-year and four-year, big and small, private and public, nonprofit and for-profit -- were accustomed to competing against one another but are now also working together, with the goal of saving money and helping a region that has seen tremendous depopulation over the past 60 years.

The colleges remain rivals for students, faculty and grants, but recognize areas where the cost of not sharing expertise -- such as in online education or the professional development of future female administrators -- would be greater than any competitive advantage that may be lost by pooling skills.

"They were competitors and they still are," says Stephen Harvey, the consortium's executive director. "But they also recognize that there are a lot of areas where you leverage limited resources, you share expertise and everyone gains because the students gain."

Consortiums, of course, aren't new. Neither are grants and, while sizable, the Oishei awards are dwarfed by the larger-scale financing doled out regularly by the Bill & Melinda Gates and Lumina Foundations.

But before the Oishei funding, the Western New York Consortium consisted of four focus groups (of which only one had regular meetings) and twice-annual gatherings of presidents. While those get-togethers were nice, Harvey says that opportunities for colleges to benefit from their neighbors were being squandered. The Rev. Joseph Levesque, president of Niagara University since 2000, says there was always a sense the consortium could be doing more.

"We've always talked about, why don't we get together for the professional development of our faculty," he says. "One university can spend a lot of money and bring some experts in. Now we can bring in even bigger personalities and have a professional development opportunity" at a significant cost savings.

Now, on a \$200,000 annual budget, the consortium has gone from barely existent to vibrant. Campus security officers meet regularly, and have plans to pool resources if a crisis strikes one campus. Admissions officers gain a wider audience of high school counselors when they hold joint sessions. All the colleges benefit from a consortium-led systemic look at the state's educational system from preschool

through the undergraduate level. A website aims to draw attention to Buffalo as a desirable destination for prospective students and instructors.

President Cynthia Zane of Hilbert College -- a 1,100-student Roman Catholic institution in the suburbs -- points to an online education conference the consortium held last year that featured a national expert and representatives from most of the 21 partner colleges. Hilbert, which had little experience in online teaching, was able to learn from the successes and failures of other colleges in the consortium. Now the college is preparing to roll out two degree-completion programs for adults in which half the coursework will be digital.

Zane came to Hilbert from the College of Mount Saint Joseph in Ohio, which was a part of two active consortiums. But despite having so many colleges in such close proximity, there was little meaningful collaboration at her new post. A 2007 grant-supported study showed the colleges brought a combined economic impact of \$3.2 billion, but Zane found faculty members in the same field at different universities had often never met.

“Even though they might be less than 20 miles apart,” Zane says, “they may not know about a common research interest.”

Capitalizing on those potential partnerships will be key as Buffalo continues to deal with demographic shifts. Census records show the industrial hub along the Erie River lost more than half its population between 1960 and 2010, including another [10.7 decline between 2000 and 2010](#). Dennis Hefner, president of the State University of New York at Fredonia, says the consortium is a way for the region's education sector to counter those changes.

"By collectively doing some of the advertising we are doing," he says, "we can get the word out to a broader geographic region. That helps us to bring students to this area. And if you bring students to this area, you bring money to this area."

There are signs of a regional economic rebound. Buffalo's waterfront is being renovated, home construction is up, and while the latest recession stung, Harvey says there's a sense that it wasn't as bad in Buffalo as it was elsewhere.

Blythe Merrill, the Oishei Foundation's vice president, sees higher education as a way to expand the region's economy. And while her foundation has long supported individual institutions, she says there is growing excitement about the consortium's recent accomplishments and potential.

“I think we've gotten quite a bit of bang for our buck,” Merrill says. “The fact they have developed these task forces and are trying hard to make the connection with others in our community can only benefit the students and the families who live in this community.”

Oishei's work has earned praise from the wider higher education field. The foundation received this year's Philanthropy Award from the Council of Independent Colleges for its support of the consortium and for drawing attention to the economic importance of the region's colleges.

Zane says a series of low-cost and common-sense collaborations, such as creating a consortiumwide internship database, have made the partnerships successful. Another key tenet: If a project isn't a good fit for some member colleges, they can bow out without any hard feelings. But as government funding dries up, she says there's a sense that collaborations are the right thing to do for both the individual colleges and the region as a whole.

“Would it be easier for us to go into our silos and do it individually? Probably,” Zane says. “Collaboration is very hard work. It takes a lot of time to communicate.

“I think each of us recognizes that the takeaway in terms of value added is significant.”

Read more: <http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2012/04/10/local-grant-vitalizes-buffalos-long-dormant-consortium#ixzz1rdVpDh9g>

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