



Chapter VI

Distance Learning Alliances in Higher Education

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INTRODUCTION

Consider the case of George Peabody College for Teachers and Vanderbilt University. The two private schools sat side by side in Nashville, Tennessee. Peabody trained generations of teachers across the United States. Vanderbilt was and remains a research university. For decades, the two schools maintained a partnership or *alliance*, and it functioned on many levels. Students at one school easily enrolled for classes at the other and transferred credits without trouble. The two schools shared library resources between themselves and a third, religious-oriented school. Athletes on Vanderbilt sports teams earned Peabody degrees. At times, Vanderbilt rented dormitory space from Peabody to house excess students. Separated only by a city street, the schools collaborated but remained distinct.

Then in the late 1970s, they announced a merger. Peabody would become part of Vanderbilt. By the early 1980s, the merger was complete. The change was wrenching for Peabody. Many faculty left or were laid off. Tuition increased to match that of Vanderbilt. Today Peabody survives only as the name of the College of Education within Vanderbilt (Dorn, 1996).

Peabody and Vanderbilt had an alliance, and it benefitted them both. At the same time though, that alliance affected the schools

themselves and in the end erased the identity of the smaller or weaker member. Alliances have always dotted the higher education landscape, but today technology offers the promise (or threat) of new, expanded alliances.

The rise of distance learning technology (DLT) has attracted much notice from scholars and the press. Schools and for-profit firms are looking for creative ways to take advantage of DLT such as compressed video and Internet-based courses that have emerged over the last decade. Among the ways organizations try to take advantage of DLT is through alliances. DLT enables and fosters alliances which take diverse forms; they vary in level of involvement, structure, and the nature of the partners themselves. No one knows with certainty the long-term effect of distance learning alliances, but the subject is worthy of study.

This chapter examines distance learning alliances in detail. It begins with a review of the literature on alliances in distance learning, follows with a taxonomy of alliances used in higher education, discusses issues associated with alliances and concludes with ideas about future research. To complement the literature, the chapter cites findings from case study research conducted at a diverse group of higher education institutions (Rayburn, 1997).

BACKGROUND

Alliances are an outgrowth of strategy within higher education. Historically, schools have formed occasional, limited alliances with other institutions. Schools have collaborated on non-instructional needs such as purchasing insurance, hiring consultants, and sharing library access (Strosnider, 1998). Further, schools have let students from other colleges take certain classes by agreement (Strosnider, 1998). Most often partners have come from geographically close neighbors as was the case with Peabody and Vanderbilt. The literature discusses alliances such as a simple exchange as well as more formal partnerships. In simple exchanges, schools merely share certain courses to fill gaps in programs or to increase quality (Hajdu and Schreckengost, 1994; Moses, Edgerton, Shaw, and Grubb, 1991; Strosnider, 1998). Distance learning technology (DLT) makes alliances of any sort easier to form, and it promotes them beyond limitations of physical distance.

The literature also cites a more complex alliance or a consortium, a multi-school group that offers both courses and programs (Baldwin,

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