Collaboration or Bust?

In most endeavors, it is beneficial to work together. This is true for universities as well as for individuals. By combining resources, small institutions have the potential to reduce some weaknesses while maintaining their individual strengths. This is the philosophy behind the Concordia University System (CUS). The system consists of the ten colleges and universities of the LCMS, bringing together over 1500 faculty and 22,000 students. The mission of the CUS is to enhance collaboration, build national identity, and enhance the strengths of the constituent institutions. The CUS pursues several worthy goals, include transmitting Lutheran values more effectively, providing enhanced quality education to college students, attaining efficiencies in the operation of the campuses and capitalizing the schools. Yet despite the lofty aspirations there remains the question, how well can distinct universities collaborate? To what extent should they collaborate? To answer these questions, I communicated with the President and the Provost of Concordia Nebraska, and added independent research and my own opinions.

To date there are several cooperative endeavors among the schools of the CUS, although many of those are invisible to most students and employees of the schools. An example of these “behind the scenes” collaborations is faculty recruitment and development. The CUS works to identify potential faculty among LCMS congregations. There is also cooperation when a faculty member at one Concordia is considered for a position at another, the presidents will communicate about whether such a change is best for the institutions. In a similar vein the Concordias have collaborated on a common request form for schools to use when they would like to place a church-work candidate, that reaches each placement officer simultaneously. In the past, principals needed to contact each university placement director individually.

There are other important but not widely seen areas in which the schools of the CUS work together. They insure their campuses together, and have system-wide lines of credit, and are able to obtain better rates as a system than they would as ten schools individually. They work together to promote the system of LCMS institutions, through common viewbooks and “Concordia Sunday” promotions at churches. The schools of the system also work together to promote the “For the Sake of the Church” initiative, designed to increase the number of LCMS students in the schools and raise endowment funds for each institution. A similar initiative, “What a Way” is a collaborative effort between schools of the CUS, seminaries and others, to increase the number of church work students.
The schools of the CUS also work together to improve their own campuses. The heads of various administrative units of each institution meet regularly, including the presidents, the chief academic officers, the chief business officers, chief student service officers, chief development officers, human resources directors, and admissions officers and staffs of the institutions meet regularly to discuss issues on their campuses, issues in common to all the campuses, and ideas for collaboration. These meetings also provide an opportunity to hear ideas from people in similar positions at similar institutions, and serve as a resource for these individuals to talk informally and simply ask questions like, “How do you handle this?” There is also a listserv for efficient communication among the presidents and the chief academic officers. The directors of international education have also gotten together to work on a collaborative model for promoting and providing accessible opportunities for students on all the campuses, possibly through a consortium among the interested schools. Less regular but still important collaboration consists of meetings among the faculty of the various institutions, through past events like the “Focus” meetings of all CUS faculty, or the recent “Two Books” conference for a discussion of science and religion. The CUS has also instituted a Leadership Institute to help campuses provide professional development to build leaders at the institutions.

Finally, there are collaborations among the schools which provide a direct benefit to students. Students at any Concordia have the ability to take distance-learning courses at any other, and may participate in international opportunities offered by other Concordias. Students at a Concordia may even attend another for up to a year without additional matriculation. The schools of the CUS agreed to all institute a semester schedule for their academic years, to facilitate collaboration and student exchange. The CUnet, which allows students to participate in distance learning courses, also allows the Concordias to collaborate on colloquy programs, by having one central entity offer the appropriate courses, while students may choose the school they take the courses through.

Concordia Nebraska has seen the benefit of collaboration in several instances. Five years ago CUNE was without a full-time chemistry professor, or anyone else who could teach Physical Chemistry. Fortunately our students were able to participate in the course offered at Concordia, Irvine. More recently, Concordia Wisconsin is currently being extraordinarily generous in helping CUNE to start its MBA program. In this collaboration, CUNE offers the core courses at its campus and students complete the courses in their emphasis areas through distance or
online courses offered by CUW. This sort of collaboration allows CUNE to offer programs to students in the area who want a large face-to-face component to their program, without having to hire the faculty necessary for so many emphasis areas. The generosity of CUW truly represents the spirit of collaboration.

As the CUS looks to the future, it must address the question of how much (more) collaboration is possible and appropriate. There are a variety of models available for how the schools may choose to work together. In May of 2000 the faculty of the CUS schools got together in Minneapolis for Focus 2000, a time to meet each other and talk about issues of interest to all the schools. At the time, the model of collaboration most discussed was one in which CUS schools may have some programs (like Education and Business) they all provide, but the more specialized programs may be offered by only one or two Concordias. For example, CUNE might become the “science Concordia”, and CSP might become the “health professions Concordia” and so on. This model assumed that the schools of the CUS were recruiting the same students, so it made little sense to compete with each other, or to duplicate programs too much.

This “specialization” model may have been viable in 2000, but today college recruiting is dominated by the fact that most students generally (although not universally) reluctant to move more than about 150 miles to go to college. Because of that, the schools of the CUS are generally not in competition with each other. The CUNE admissions office has found when they look at recruits who eventually did not attend CUNE, only 4-7% end up attending another Concordia. Even among LCMS students, only about 17% end up attending a different Concordia. This fact about students today changes the nature of collaboration available for the CUS schools. First and foremost, it makes the “specialization” model of collaboration untenable. Students in Nebraska interested in the health professions will not go to Minnesota to go to school at CSP; instead they will go to another school in Nebraska or Iowa. Students’ reluctance to travel far for college constrains other collaborative initiatives where students spend significant time on other campuses. So, for example, if CUNE tried to offer a “Physics Semester” where students from around the CUS could take most of the upper-level physics courses required for secondary certification, such an initiative would probably not generate sufficient student interest or participation.
However, the same trend of students staying close to home actually enhances collaborative opportunities in other areas. Most importantly, since the Concordias do not need to see themselves as being in competition with each other, each is free to develop into the sort of institution it imagines, without worrying about “stepping on toes”. If every Concordia worked to develop an outstanding business program, for example, this would not hurt the others, because each Concordia would be recruiting different students. Indeed, this would open up opportunities for collaboration, like that between CUNE and CUW with the MBA program.

I can imagine other possibilities for collaboration among the schools of the CUS. First, as each institution develops more online course offerings, these need to be made more easily available and advertised more widely on other campuses. Each Concordia has faculty with unique talents and interests who could develop online courses that may be of interest outside their own campuses. If online courses from each Concordia were listed in the Banner course offerings during registration, students may be able to choose from a wider variety of courses. This would be similar to the shared listings that library consortiums maintain; when a person searches for a book they are searching the holdings of all the libraries in the consortium, and when they find what they need they can get it from any library. Courses could be managed in the same way.

Another collaborative effort I would like to see among the Concordias is a system of faculty exchange. As finances get tighter it is harder to maintain a sabbatical system. However, the ability to spend a semester or a year at another Concordia might be a suitable substitute to re-energize the faculty member and the department. There are obvious issues to work out, such as load weight and housing options, but a limited system of faculty exchange could provide a powerful option for faculty renewal and development, and for departmental revival.

Through their long history, the Concordias have maintained a friendly competitiveness. Even among alumni, it is common to hear of elementary schools where the River Forest graduates will compete as a team against Seward graduates in informal softball games. However, as budgets tighten and as recruiting pools become more geographically isolated, it is important and healthy for the schools of the CUS to explore more ways to work together.