

## Creating Community and Connectedness through Cross-Campus Collaboration

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### Abstract:

*Faculty members, by the nature of their scholarly training programs, tend to be experts in a narrow field of study. In graduate school, this is a rich and rewarding experience as they are surrounded and supported by peers with similar interests, backgrounds, and curiosities. Once graduate school is over, however, many leave this experience behind as they transition to new roles as faculty members in institutions where they become the sole expert in their particular field or discipline. This transition can be academically isolating and lonely, making it difficult to continue to feel engaged and connected to one's scholarly roots. In this reflective paper, we offer insight into this often-felt, but not often-discussed, challenge faced by many faculty members. Specifically, we propose that forming intentional cross-campus collaborations can reap benefits far beyond the scholarly arena. We first offer an example of a cross-campus collaboration using our own personal success story and then briefly discuss the various elements of a cross-campus collaboration. We then provide a discussion of the benefits and challenges of cross-campus collaboration, and importantly a mashup of tips and advice for starting and maintaining your own cross-campus collaboration. Our goal is to empower faculty to break out of their academic isolation and find meaning, value, and purpose in their own cross-campus collaborations.*

### Key Words:

collaboration; academic isolation; teaching-focused institution; networking; research partnership

## Introduction

For some, the faculty experience is one of rich intellectual stimulation and collaboration, supplied by curious, engaged, and invested peers or graduate students in one's discipline. However, for those who opt for instructional careers at primarily-teaching institutions (especially the more undergraduate-focused), the on-the-ground reality is one that veers far away from this more idealized stereotype. It is an experience that can often feel very academically isolating and lonely.

You are likely the only 'one' of your type – the only social psychologist, the only rhetorician, the only wildlife ecologist. While this may be within the context of a larger program or department that has related disciplines, the distinctions between everyone's areas of expertise are often large enough to not be bridged for research interests. Productive (and sometimes contentious) discussion occurs around big-picture curriculum and pedagogy, but when it comes to one's research or the struggles of teaching a specific course, it may be too much effort to get everyone on the same page for that conversation to be productive. This is born out in the, admittedly small, literature that examines the transition of pre-tenure faculty to a new institution. Research finds that new faculty feel that lack of connection with their new peers, particularly in the scholarly domain (see Bataille & Brown, 2006; O'Meara, Terosky, & Neumann, 2008; Ponjuan, Conley, & Trower, 2011).

While certainly not the only option, one solution to this 'academic isolation' is a cross-campus collaboration. Some faculty depart their graduate studies with strong relationships with their mentors and/or fellow graduate students, which can continue to bear scholarly fruit over the years. However, this is not a universal experience. If you find yourself at a primarily teaching-focused institution and are not able to continue those graduate-school based collaborations, it now becomes important to look for others in your discipline who can serve that 'productive peer' role. A cross-campus collaboration can provide a similarly-minded expert with whom you can work productively on scholarly projects or brainstorm ideas for new course projects, solutions to students' resistance to particular content, or delight in a student's 'a-ha' moment. Importantly, a cross-campus collaboration can create community and connectedness in a profession where you might feel like you are the only one of your 'kind'.

## Our Story

By this point, you might be wondering who we are and why we feel so passionately about the value of cross-campus collaboration. The short answer is that we have our own cross-campus collaboration success story. Indeed, we have reaped immeasurable benefits from our collaboration in a relatively short period of time (approaching three years since we joined forces). For instance, we collaboratively developed, implemented, and empirically tested a novel classroom intervention aimed to reduce the levels of stress and anxiety experienced by our students in a statistics course. Two grant awards funded the development and implementation of this collaborative intervention. We produced and published an instructor's manual to accompany our intervention and have also written and published an empirical manuscript documenting the efficacy of the intervention. We have also presented our intervention in three different venues, including one presentation at the national level.

Our cross-campus collaboration began as many relationships do – that is, through a mutual connection who “hooked us up” and encouraged a blind date of sorts. It began when our connector attended a networking event at a conference where she met one of us for the first time, while being a colleague at the same institution as the other. She saw the opportunity for us to join forces, exhibiting similar academic backgrounds and teaching and research interests, and encouraged us to reach out to one another. As our institutions are nearly 900 miles apart, we took this first step via a few blind emails and eventually transitioned to phone conversations. We learned very quickly that we shared many of the same struggles and faced many of the same challenges in our academic lives, despite the fact that one of us is at a small, private liberal arts institution and the other at a mid-sized, public state institution. These shared experiences lead us to the development of our classroom intervention, and in turn to our success in securing grants, presenting our work publicly, and publishing.

### **Cross- Campus Collaboration (CCC)**

Our story of cross-campus collaboration reflects but one style of how cross-campus collaboration can work. We strongly believe that cross-campus collaborations can be effective in a variety of different ways. Through some trial and error, we found “our way” and thus capitalized on the strengths that each of us can bring to our working relationship. In its most basic form, cross-campus collaboration is a purposeful partnership between faculty members working at different institutions. This partnership is goal-directed, meaning both parties share a set of common objectives that will ideally be met through collaboration. The style of your collaboration can take on any number of forms. We began our collaboration via email, but quickly realized that we could be more productive over the phone. Video chatting (e.g., Skype, FaceTime) may also be an option for you to enhance the personal experience of your collaboration. In any style of collaboration, the use of technology tools make collaboration easier and more efficient (e.g., Google Docs allows you to create and edit documents together in real-time; Qualtrics allows you to share surveys with multiple collaborators so that you can work together on survey design and data management).

Importantly, a cross-campus collaboration should provide each member of the partnership with something they would not otherwise be able to achieve on their own. Perhaps you lack access to a research participant subject pool at your small institution, limiting your ability to efficiently collect data. Maybe your rural campus lacks in diversity – racial and ethnic diversity, economic diversity, geographic diversity, religious diversity, political diversity, diversity of sexual orientations, or even diversity in life experiences. A cross-campus collaboration can address these practical limitations of conducting research both in your own area of expertise and/or in the classroom (e.g., scholarship of teaching and learning). Outside of addressing practical limitations, a cross-campus collaboration can also function to connect you with others who share your teaching and/or research interests. In our case, collaborating across our campuses allowed us to both gain access to a larger population of diverse research participants (in our case, students) *and* join forces with someone who was passionate about enhancing student success through applied research.

## Benefits of CCC

While many of the benefits of cross-campus collaboration are evident, there are some less-obvious benefits to engaging in this type of work. Support, return-on-investment, and offloading are but three of these benefits that are not always as immediately apparent. When it comes to support, we find that our partnership does not always solely revolve around the project that initially brought us together. While our institutions differ in terms of size and governance, we have faced many similar professional issues. You will find that your cross-campus collaboration partner can be a 'safe' outlet for you to vent about campus issues without risking existing campus relationships. You can also be an asset to each other, writing letters of support for retention, tenure, or promotion. Further, your cross-campus collaboration can have a strong return-on-investment. Initially, it may seem like you are investing a lot into building the relationship and in the coordination of collaboration at a distance. However, the return in both tangible and emotional support will far outweigh that initial investment. Choosing to collaborate on a project brings additional knowledge, contacts, resources, and experience – you will likely learn many new tips and tricks from your partnership as your collaboration progresses.

Offloading (usually guilt-free!) is yet another unique benefit of cross-campus collaboration. We all have tasks that we loathe doing, whether it be managing data, writing an introduction section, or completing reference checks. A cross-campus collaboration allows you the opportunity to share these tasks with someone else. In the best-case scenario, you and your cross-campus partner will be more complementary than similar when it comes to your preferences. In this case, you can offload the tasks you loathe to your partner. Of course, you must remember that it is a 2-way street and you have to be willing to take on those things that your partner loathes, too. In the worst-case scenario, where you and your cross-campus partner are too similar in your preferences, you at least have each other's support and empathy as you muddle through those things you would rather not do. Misery loves company!

## Challenges of CCC

Any type of collaboration, whether cross-campus or otherwise, comes with its own unique set of challenges. Just as our students often struggle handling the nuances of partner or group assignments, there are some potential troublesome areas to consider when faculty embark on a collaboration across campuses. Accommodation and communication are perhaps two of the most significant to consider. Maintaining regular contact with your collaborator may become challenging during times when your schedule suddenly explodes, so being accommodating is a must. Unexpected student crises, administrative tasks, and colleagues in need of your time and attention will always happen. Since you, like us, may be at primarily teaching institutions, the burden of resolving these issues will, at least partly, impact your workload. At some point, either you or your new-found collaborator will not meet a deadline. Be accommodating when this happens. Though challenging, we need to remember that most of these deadlines are self-imposed and be compassionate in responding to it.

From the other end, maintaining an open line of communication during those times when the unexpected happens is crucial. While it may be easier to put aside your cross-

campus commitments in the moment, do not go silent. As a long-distance collaboration, you have to work harder to contextualize your work life. If you know you are not going to meet a deadline, let your collaborator know as soon as you realize that. Part of this communication might involve you adapting your contact, as needed, to your current situation. Sometimes you can go longer between calls (or their equivalent) as projects and work life ebb and flow. It is important not to be too rigid in your scheduling, but also to be proactive if more consistent contact is needed to get the work done or keep people on schedule.

As a side note, going 'digital' in your communication can have its own set of challenges. One to consider is the challenge of losing nonverbal cues when you cannot see the person with whom you are communicating. You will likely need to put in extra effort to ensure the tone of your intended message is clear. In emails, this means using those emoticons (☺) and being explicit in cueing for tone (e.g., "Okay, I'm being snarky here, but did the reviewer just not read the whole section that addressed this?!?!"). Similarly, over the phone, this means making sure the tone of your voice expresses your intended message (even if you are someone who maybe does not naturally inflect your voice much).

## Tips and Advice

Our own cross-campus collaboration has been full of ups and downs (mostly ups, for the record), but it has especially been a learning experience for us. As educators, it would of course be ill-fated of us to not share what we have learned with you in a few pieces of culminating advice. The first of which is to know yourself. It may sound cliché, but you can only be a productive member of a cross-campus collaboration if you know your own strengths and weaknesses, your tendencies and work habits, and what works for you to be optimally productive. Maybe you need solid deadlines and specific tasks to be working on each week, else running the risk of 'working' without producing any actual outcomes. Maybe you like to get a big chunk of work done all in one sitting, or perhaps you like to space out projects into smaller work sessions. Maybe you are not confident in your writing abilities, data analysis skills, or leadership capacities. Once you know yourself, be prepared to explain that to someone new. Be awkwardly open, even with your quirky habits and silly pet peeves (we all have them).

Doing this will allow you to play to each other's strengths and it will pay off in the long run. You will find that as you work together more, you will note preferences and skills in each other. These can actually shape some of the project decisions, so that the project really does reflect each individual involved. Another way to ensure that your project reflects everyone involved is to plan 'process' meetings, not just 'project' meetings. You will need somewhat regular check-ins on how the process is going for you both – is everyone satisfied with their part of the workload, quality of production from each other, the direction of the project? These types of conversations are just as important as the project meetings but are often overlooked.

In terms of *actually* meeting, we found great success (and joy) in scheduling ourselves a "Writing Boot Camp". If at all possible, we highly suggest that you try to incorporate something similar into your cross-campus collaboration at some point in your journey. We found the summer to be the time when we were most flexible with our

schedules, so we chose a 3-day engagement in a neutral city that was easily accessible to us both by flights (recall we are 900 miles apart; a road trip might be equally as effective in your case). We chose a neutral city to ease any burden of one of us being the “host”, feeling that would allow us both equal opportunity to focus on the tasks at hand. Since we had never actually met before, we spent the majority of the first day getting to know each other, touring the city and sampling local cuisine. The following two days were spent either in the hotel lobby (free people watching and coffee all day!) or in one of our hotel rooms working on very specific writing tasks we had decided on before making the trip. We were mindful about tabling any issues that arose that could be handled over email or phone, focusing on making the most out of the short time we had to work together in person. Not only did this experience allow us to get a large amount of writing accomplished, it also strengthened our cross-campus relationship. For a few short days, we got to immerse ourselves in each other’s lives, getting to really know each other on a deeper level. This new knowledge of each other eased many of our future challenges as we had a better understanding of where the other was coming from. We have since had other meetings, such as presenting at conferences together, but having dedicated and uninterrupted time together in our “Writing Boot Camp” was invaluable.

Finally, we have learned that having an ‘elevator pitch’ to describe your relationship with your cross-campus collaborator can be really helpful. In other words, our advice to you is to be able to define your relationship as collaborators to others because people *will* be asking you a lot and you *will* have to explain yourself. In the early stages of our collaboration, we both fumbled around in our words when a colleague (or partner) would ask to whom we were talking or what we were working on. Often times, we ended up sounding as if we were hiding something or flat out lying. In a (now) funny example, a colleague became worried that one of us was on the job market, taking phone interviews, because he noticed the office door closed and the frequent phone calls. We have both since learned to laugh at this strange challenge and figured out how to describe our relationship to others.

## Final Thoughts

Though not a perfect solution, and one that by its very nature requires more effort and intentionality, we have found the cross-campus collaboration to solve more challenges than it generated and be one with benefits and a return-on-investment that we did not go into it expecting. We have also shared our story enough to know that we have not, as a profession, examined this academic isolation experience with enough care nor do we give it much voice. Many of us felt it, but did not have a concept for it, which impedes our ability to find effective solutions. Once aware of it and knowing that we cannot change the structural limitations of our institutions, we instead turned to finding others who could help meet these professional needs (and for whom we could do the same). We hope that by sharing our story, you too can feel empowered to break out of your academic isolation and find meaning, value, and purpose in your own collaborations.

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