

The Boston Consortium

Five Years of Progress

The Boston Consortium for Higher Education is about to celebrate five years of incorporation. Following is a review of the Consortium's progress and significant accomplishments.

1998–2003

report from



THE BOSTON CONSORTIUM
FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

The Boston Consortium for Higher Education's mission is to create a collaborative environment that inspires its member colleges and universities in the development and practical implementation of innovative cost management and quality improvement ideas.

Babson College
Bentley College
Berklee College of Music
Boston College
Boston University
Brandeis University
Harvard University
MIT
Northeastern University
Olin College
Tufts University
Wellesley College
Wheaton College

The Boston Consortium for Higher Education began with the vision of the Chief Financial Officers of three schools. Within a year, eight other major schools began to participate, and our membership is now at thirteen with a cap of fifteen private institutions.

Our mission is to decrease operational costs by reducing redundancy in the non-academic operations of our members. It is also to develop and employ shared best practices so that our institutions may have the same world-class operations that our members already provide within academics.

The Consortium Board has always understood intuitively that the old approach to collaboration would not work.

Traditionally, most consortia across the country have defined collaboration in altruistic terms. The Boston Consortium has a very pragmatic outlook. Every school determines the value of participation in a given effort. Not all projects will benefit every school, and we are realistic that not every effort undertaken will be implemented. Nonetheless, the collective activities make the Consortium a vital resource for change, and participation continues to grow. Meaningful dialogue and facilitated work processes remove the veil of culture and discover the similarity of back-office operations. This approach, employing enlightened self-interest, not altruism, differentiates us from other consortia.

The resources the Board provides plus our Davis Foundation and other grants catalyze change, but the energy resides in the intrinsic motivation of the middle managers. Most of those active within TBC are the innovators and early adopters of the cohort. While less than a fifth of the total population of managers, they are committed to continuous improvement. They take pride in their work and in their institutions.

Our practice is to find where collective action is truly effective and meaningful within the responsibilities of every non-academic discipline. We focus on the social aspect of work, the value of working together to add scale and intellectual capacity, and the need to experiment and ultimately solve previously intractable issues. The Consortium is a safe practice field, with administrative oversight and (often) with separate resources. It aids in the retention of staff, and gives them a place to develop professionally, not only within, but also across our schools.

We do not train individuals and then expect a project of value. We create projects based upon assessment of need, and provide expertise and support as needed. This is action or work-based learning. Our successes are growing, and we are observed by external entities as a means to create positive change without the trauma of top-down reengineering initiatives. In fact, we make it easier for our institutions to create an environment that encourages and supports continuous improvement.

The exchange of knowledge that occurs routinely in our communities of practice is difficult to quantify, but we know it exceeds the more visible accomplishments cited in this report. Simply ask any active participant. Ultimately, TBC is not only an agent for change, it is a resource for managers facing increasingly constrained economic resources. It is a community of learning in every sense.

We are proud of our accomplishments, but far more excited by the potential that we are collectively discovering. For Consortium members and their staff, dialogue has led to relationships and thus to *trust*. With trustful relationships in place, the opportunities are limitless.

Five Years of Progress

As we approach five years of incorporation, it is appropriate that The Boston Consortium for Higher Education review its accomplishments and progress. As the only CFO-governed and led organization of its kind among more than 125 Higher Education consortia in the United States, we have employed a set of tools that reflect current best practices in cutting edge management science. The experiment that began in 1996 has matured. We are now viewed as a leader in creating communities of practice that employ action-learning techniques. Other consortia are now adopting several of these methods. Following are some of the successful efforts of our 13-member collaborative:

Shared Risk Management Function

Brandeis University, Berklee College of Music, Olin College, Wellesley College, and Wheaton College are now sharing a single risk manager and creating a unified front to brokers of insurance. Related activities are coordinated and linked where mutually beneficial to other member institutions.

Shared Diversity Recruitment

A single point of marketing and access to talent among minority communities is now underway. Involving all 13 members, and utilizing both grant and existing member resources, this initiative provides a scale economy by focusing on a shared need of our members.

Staff Professional Development and Training

Continuing education and development of staff is a priority for every member, and Consortium participants have set up a system to provide or augment those needs. Directed by Chief Human Resource Officers or their delegates, this group utilizes the Consortium as a vehicle for logistics and recruitment of instructors, many of whom are drawn from faculty. Cost avoidance or reduction involves travel costs, lowered through-put expense without compromise in quality of instruction. All member schools have taken advantage of this program, with leadership and ongoing management provided by Babson College, Boston College, Brandeis University, Wellesley College, and Wheaton College.

Environmental Health & Safety Website

An early accomplishment, this web-based instruction permitted member schools to comply with OSHA requirements without creation of redundant systems. All 13 institutions have been involved.

Owner Controlled Construction Insurance Program (OCIP)

By combining several projects' insurance requirements, hundreds of thousands of dollars of cost have been avoided. As new projects are undertaken concurrently, members who have adopted this practice in the past now know to turn to one another and determine if they can leverage scale economy in this aspect of project cost. Schools include Babson College, Bentley College, Boston University, Brandeis University, Northeastern University, and Tufts University.

Sponsored Research Training and Certification

The Washington, D.C.-based certifying authority broke with tradition when Boston Consortium members argued that our area was so concentrated with research universities that it required Boston based training to remove the current backlog.

The success in 2002 was such that the effort will be repeated in 2003. Participants included Harvard University, MIT, Boston University, Tufts University, Wellesley College, Olin College, and Boston College.

Strategic Facility Planning Econometric Tool

After sponsoring a series of workshops with facility managers, it became apparent that a model for assessing current and future construction and facility maintenance costs would add immeasurably to the quality of the decision-making process. By engaging a new firm to work with our membership and utilizing grant funds, we have been able to create a de facto standard locally that is gaining favor among major colleges and universities across the United States. All members have been involved.

Emergency Preparation Workshops

In 2000 and 2002, the Consortium assembled key players among its membership, and beyond, to insure that best-practices were engaged in this fundamental process. The most recent event attracted close to 300 senior managers. Future efforts will revolve around creation of mutual support pacts, given the evolution of planning since 9/11 to involve a different scale of incident and planning. As is often the case, Learning Histories are subsequently published to capture the content and spirit of the event. All members participated in this session and the follow-up.

Healthcare Benefit Cost Planning

As an area of great concern, and in an effort to insure a shared understanding of this cost and organizational obligation, members have engaged in sessions to share appropriate information and determine what steps can be taken to control this spiraling cost. For each of the past four years, such forums have been well-attended and intense. Most recently, a “big four” consultant identified the limitations we face in controlling these costs, and verified that, in the unlikely event that all members would combine their membership into a single risk pool, costs would actually rise. Counter-intuitive results like this, while disappointing,

allow us to focus on viable solutions and take steps toward the desired result. All members participated.

Energy Cost Management

In the early years of the Consortium, the desire to identify some cost-saving opportunities catalyzed several efforts. The MassHEFA PowerOptions contract was discussed across the members and individual concerns addressed via the discussion process. In a separate effort with fuel oil, unspoken assumptions were surfaced that resulted in significant savings for several schools. It is worth noting that these discoveries also lead us to understand the value of dialogue and discussion across schools. Best practices were uncovered, but also unsuspected obstacles to simple solutions. All members participated.

Web-based Training: ElementK

Members established a contract for provision of high level training for applications that IS staff might ordinarily take in distant classroom settings. The spread of this program is such that more than 14,000 engage it for everything from simple Microsoft applications to esoteric and limited use applications. Babson College, Bentley College, Boston College, Boston University, Brandeis University, Berklee College of Music, MIT, Northeastern University, Olin College, Tufts University, Wheaton College, and Wellesley College have actively utilized this partnership.

Exploration of e-Procurement Opportunities

Dating back several years, Consortium members have explored and experimented with several technologies to enable distributed purchasing practices. Currently, Harvard University, Tufts University, and Boston University are exploring a promising application that was based upon a best practice at MIT. The potential cost savings are significant. .

Continued

Long-term Care Contract

Members Babson, Bentley, Brandeis, Olin, Wellesley and Wheaton colleges have pooled their needs and leveraged the Consortium to form a venture that is based upon each school's needs but with a single contract vehicle. It has been so attractive that some members have abandoned their existing program to participate in the collective arrangement.

Retreats and Speaker Forums

Creating a sense of community requires the 14 active communities of practice to convene routinely, but as important is the need to meet across disciplines. Events such as biennial retreats or shared forums for issues of interdisciplinary interest meet this need. We have been pleased to have many speakers who share their experiences and offer encouragement and support. Included are such individuals as Ray Stata, founder of Analog Devices; Gary Burchill, CEO of the Center for Quality of Management; Dr. Don Berwick, CEO of the Institute for Healthcare Improvement; Charles Baker, CEO of Harvard Pilgrim Health Care; Marilyn MacMillan, CIO of NYU; David Lascell, Esq., Past Chairman of the Association of Governing Boards; Janice Abraham, CEO of United Educators; Ray Anderson, CEO, Interface Inc.; Jeff Rubin, Center for Digital Commerce at Syracuse University; Chris Davis, Esq., of Goodwin, Proctor and Hoar, and many others.

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Communities of Practice

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Controllers
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Employment Managers
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Fine and Performing Arts
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Organizational Development & Training
Professional Facilitators Network
Public Safety
Purchasing
Risk Management
Sponsored Research
Telecommunications
The Training Collaborative

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