This is the beginning of my story and the basis for this chapter. You see, the idea of someone contacting me to ask how to build a multi-campus collaborative distance-learning organization in “a moment” is typical. Most people, administrators included, have no idea what it takes to develop and nurture a unit such as the UT TeleCampus. Those who do understand have probably built one themselves. The TeleCampus is part of the University of Texas System (www.utsystem.edu), which includes nine academic universities and six health institutions, with a total of approximately 195,000 students. In our case, the concept of “system” refers to a grouping of institutions where an umbrella administrative unit has broad oversight of the system as a whole. While each campus has its own administrative infrastructure, the administration unit coordinates many system-wide functions, such as group health insurance, legal affairs, and facilities and construction planning. The UT TeleCampus is a centralized utility that was created in 1998 to help further the development of distance—and specifically online—education for the UT System as a whole. But this chapter is not about how the UT System is organized or even how the UT TeleCampus functions as an aggregator. It’s about the many challenges faced when flexibility is established for a system through a centralized virtual university project.

While this is not a case study on the building of the UT TeleCampus, most of what will be covered is a result of that effort to move multiple
campuses into a flexible-learning environment. I will tell you some stories about how administrators’ perceptions can be more influential than reality on a flexible-learning project, how massaging egos can bring about buy-in for a new movement, and how alarming it can be to find out how little many people care about the nuts and bolts of collaboration. I also try to relate how gratifying it is when “Aha!” moments become a daily circumstance, when everyone starts to “get it,” and I suggest ways to sustain the momentum and keep the idea of flexibility moving forward. And, finally, I discuss the part that economics and politics play in building these types of flexible-learning (i.e., online) systems and how they can influence the role of these systems once established. Think of it as a walk down memory lane during a time in the 1990s when online education was new, funding was flush, and everyone was excited about how this new delivery mode could increase the flexibility of the institutions—even if they didn’t realize it themselves at the time. And then fast forward to 2009, when online education has indeed forced more flexibility but funding is now an issue across the board. As we often say in our office, “Everyone loves what we do but no one wants to pay for it.” Intrigued? Read on—I’m just getting started.

IN THE BEGINNING

Twelve years ago, I didn’t think that creating a multi-campus “virtual university” had anything to do with promoting flexibility in our institutions. To me, this concept of flexibility was (and continues to be) all about access. But not access in a way that just means making something available—it’s more about a deliberate attempt to think about students’ circumstances, about how, when, and why they learn. It’s about truly taking educational opportunities to a level that implies that the institution is willing to do whatever it takes to make these opportunities available to students. I also had no idea how challenging it would be to work with so many institutions at once—and I was completely naïve about various university processes. I felt from the start that because this was a good thing to do, everything would just fall into place and all of our campuses would sing my praises for heading up the initiative. This was the first of many errors in my thinking.
Faculty, for one, responded quite differently than I expected. Those of us who were developing the UT TeleCampus (the vice chancellor, various staff, and me) thought that the faculty would embrace the opportunity to develop and teach courses online. What could be wrong with being able to extend the reach of your courses, provide a more flexible learning environment, and even provide flexibility for yourself? Apparently, a lot. I remember my boss at the time, Vice Chancellor Mario Gonzalez, catching considerable criticism from faculty members across the UT System as he tried to explain the concept of the virtual university. They were certain that the system’s administration offices were simply trying to cut costs by putting thousands of students in each online course and at the same time getting rid of the faculty and their salaries, or significantly reducing their numbers. We were shocked! There was very little trust in the whole idea of a UT TeleCampus, partly because of fear of the unknown and partly because we in TeleCampus were from UT System administration offices and were perceived as carrying agendas of unfunded mandates for others in the UT System. You know the old saying, “We’re from System, and we’re here to help.” I’m not sure our colleagues believed that at first.

So what did we do? The first thing was to get a handle on, or fully analyze, our place in the process. By that I mean we recognized, accepted, and actually embraced the idea that we were going to be a service entity, and we decided from the beginning that we would provide the best services possible. That mantra continues to be a driving force in the UT TeleCampus and in my opinion—which counts, since I’m the author of this chapter—it is one of the primary reasons for our success and possibly the reason why others who did not embrace this concept failed. We help our institutions to look good. That is our goal. I tell presidents and provosts, deans, and faculty members the same thing. The TeleCampus is designed to make the faculty look good by helping them to develop and deliver high-quality courses, and to make the institution look good by ensuring that the courses and programs are meeting the expectations of our state’s higher-education governing board as well as regional and discipline-specific accreditation associations. If you think about it, my assurance to a chief academic officer that what his or her institution offers online through a centralized unit is of high quality and meets accreditation standards can be a pretty powerful promise.
But acceptance did not come overnight. There were meetings with faculty senates and the system-wide faculty council, discussions among executive officers on the campuses, and conversations with distance-education staff on the various campuses. There were turf issues where one campus was overly concerned that another campus would steal its students if the other campus offered courses online that the first campus did not, or that if they both offered the course or program online, one campus might draw in potential students from another campus. There was fear of losing jobs. Many reasons could be cited for the resistance we encountered in those early years, but I think the biggest reason was fear of the unknown and the perception that this new form of delivering instruction was growing exponentially right before their traditional eyes. Scary stuff indeed.

For me, the key was to find the most skeptical but influential people on each campus and build relationships with them. It’s really all about relationships. Once established, they open the door for honest and respectful discussions. They build trust. Truth be told, some of these skeptical and influential people found me instead of me finding them because they wanted to get to the bottom of what we were trying to do—they didn’t want to wait for a meeting; they wanted to know right then. Sometimes the conversations were tense and challenging, but in the long run, I not only won over most of those skeptics, I went on to have great friendships with them. I can look back at those beginnings and say with all sincerity that building those relationships has had a major influence on the success of the TeleCampus.

One of my favourite books is *The Power of Nice—How to Conquer the Business World with Kindness*, by Linda Thaler and Robin Koval. I happened to catch Thaler and Koval talking about the book on the *Nightline* television program several years ago. They caught my attention because everything they were saying was exactly how I attempt to live my life, both personally and professionally. Although the title of the book references the business world, the “Power of Nice Principles” (there are six) can be applied to education, any workplace, or life in general quite easily. With chapters entitled “Tell the Truth” and “Shut Up and Listen,” you learn quickly that by being honest with colleagues, by acknowledging their own level of understanding and expertise in addition to your own, and by
actually listening to their ideas instead of formulating what you plan to say next while they are still talking, you massage their egos in a way that is sincere. I don’t use the idea of massaging egos in a negative way. What I have learned, however, is that everyone needs positive strokes. When you are attempting to do something revolutionary (which is how I view what we did in building the TeleCampus in the late 1990s) and you don’t provide those strokes, or you don’t appreciate the thoughts expressed by those you plan to serve, you’ll end up going nowhere before you ever get started. I highly recommend the book (it’s a short read) for anyone planning to jump into a lion’s den.

Another major driver to our initial success was our relationship with the UT System Board of Regents, particularly Regent Tony Sanchez. We met regularly with the board back then, so the members understood well what we were doing, and having a regent who was excited about distance and online education at such an early stage was truly an advantage. Combine that with having an innovative chancellor like William Cunningham and things happen. We could have had all the great ideas in the world about how to move the initiative forward and become change agents, but without having access to people with power, we wouldn’t have been successful.

The bottom line is that the establishment of strong relationships helped to break through the barrier of mistrust we were bound to experience, and they helped to change the minds of many a skeptic. And when some of those relationships are with influential administrators, they can open doors across an entire campus—or a system, for that matter.

“COLLABORATE? ARE YOU KIDDING?”

One of the reasons behind the establishment of the UT TeleCampus was to facilitate collaboration among our campuses. Our first program, in 1999, was highly collaborative—an MBA that involved eight schools of business at eight institutions. I know what you’re thinking. Yes, looking back, we probably were crazy, but at the time, it seemed like the right thing to do. And in the long run, it worked well to get a lot of people on board quickly and to jump-start the online initiative.
The challenges were many. We needed the schools to agree upon a curriculum, agree upon who would develop and deliver what courses, agree to accept each other’s courses as their own, and agree to offer the degree even though the student would take only two courses from the home institution. And if that wasn’t enough, we had to figure out how to allow these students to take courses from multiple institutions without being admitted in a traditional manner so they could avoid applying for admission to each campus separately, paying application fees, and so on. Oh, and let’s just throw in the fact that the UT System institutions do not share a common student information system, nor do they all use the same brand (e.g., PeopleSoft, Banner, etc.). Moving them to a flexible-learning environment all at once was not going to be easy, but once we decided to develop the program, there was no turning back.

Like most university systems, the institutions in our system were not used to collaborating on many things in 1997. All of our campuses are standalone institutions, with UT Austin being our flagship research campus. The remaining eight academic campuses are not satellite versions of UT Austin; they each have their own mission and direction. And most of them are located several hours from each other, so the idea of working on projects, much less academic programs, in a collaborative fashion was foreign to most faculty. But we were determined to bring this new model forward and help our campuses to work together.

It should be noted that UT Austin was not one of the eight campuses involved in the collaborative MBA. Remember that online education was brand new and did not have the reputation for quality that it has today. The dean of the business school at that time probably had legitimate concerns about how it would look for his business school to be involved in a collaborative program like this. He was paid to worry about the business school, not to worry about a UT System initiative. I don’t think it’s a secret that flagship institutions will generally push back on collaboration if they do not consider the potential collaborators to be peer institutions.

So how did we get the eight participating schools of business to agree to this whole collaboration thing in the first place? Easy: it was cash. Chancellor Cunningham, who, as I’ve mentioned, was very innovative and believed in having the campuses work together, had the foresight to recognize that in order to get the campuses excited about an initiative
from the UT System offices, he needed to provide financial support to help offset course-development costs. After all, even though we were facilitating the collaboration and wrapping a suite of faculty (training, course development) and student (digital library, access to key staff on campuses) support services around the program, the courses and the faculty members belonged to the institutions. And while it of course helped that the push for the MBA was coming from a chancellor who also happened to be a former dean of the UT Austin school of business as well as a former president of that institution (and some of the deans probably went along with the idea for those reasons), in the long run, I think the deans would all agree that it was indeed the right thing to do at the time and that by working together, we built an extremely successful program.

I think one of the biggest mistakes that people in senior leadership roles like mine make is to not bring the right people to the table at the right time. It’s almost as if we want to avoid the pain and misery so much that we skip certain steps in the process. For example, once we decided to build collaborative programs, it became clear that we couldn’t expect students to formally apply for admission to every campus involved in a program and then ask them to register separately at each campus each semester. At the same time, we knew that making changes to any administrative process was going to cause great distress for our admissions officers and registrars. But pushing forward the concept of flexible learning is not just about developing programs or changing viewpoints; it involves serious consideration of how our administrative processes must change to accommodate new ways to deliver higher education.

We chose to bring admissions officers and registrars to the table early, and, as you might imagine, we definitely “rattled their cages” and provoked some mental anxieties: “What? Allow students to take courses from the institution without filling out the traditional forms and then not register in the typical manner?” But do you know what happened? After all of the discussions about why this wouldn’t work or how it couldn’t be done, it was the people at the table themselves—yes, the very people who pushed back at the beginning—who came up with the solution. This is how you make changes that stick. You don’t mandate and you don’t try to create the solution yourself. Instead, you let the people who understand the issues make the changes. My role as the leader of this new organization was to
provide a space where solutions could be discovered and to encourage the process with positive reinforcement. As a result, we ended up with a process that would allow students, once admitted to a UT institution, to enroll in courses across the system, and the process was developed by the very people who would be administering it. It was a win-win for everyone, and it put us one step further down the road to creating that flexible-learning environment.

So, as you can see, what happened during the process of creating the MBA as a highly collaborative program is that we accidentally stumbled into transforming policies and processes that forced what we are now calling flexible learning. We had no idea at the time that we were actually providing the stimulus for systemic change on our campuses. I am not implying that our campuses had not already been delivering distance education—many had been doing so for years—or even that we were the first organization in the UT System to put forward ideas about online education. But by stepping way out of the comfort zone of so many people to build highly collaborative programs, we were able to break through barriers and change points of view in a broad way. And, as a result of the experience developing the MBA, the TeleCampus became known as a “collaboration engine,” which opened doors for other projects that would come in our future.

STAKEHOLDERS AND THEIR INFLUENCE

I wish I could say that all of our stakeholders have understood the TeleCampus and what we do and that they have been our champions. Unfortunately, and realistically, I can’t do that—but please know that we had a lot of stakeholders, from our boards of regents to UT System executive officers, to campus presidents and provosts, to the deans and faculty members on those campuses. We are a very large system so it’s not necessary for everyone to be in favour of what we do. However, it does make a difference when the stakeholders decide to take a stand one way or the other. I’ll never forget the year we were just starting to develop the TeleCampus. In a meeting, Regent Sanchez asked me, “Dr. [he always just called me Dr.], why can’t we just film every professor at UT Austin and
send it over the Internet to our campuses?” This was 1997, mind you, so my first response was of course related to the technology and how we hadn’t reached the point of sending full motion video across the ether. But the second part of my response really got to the heart of the matter. In order to build buy-in for a multi-campus initiative, it’s important that no one campus (especially the flagship campus) be seen as superior. Whether or not the campus is ranked higher than the other campuses in the system is irrelevant for a project like this. We needed all of our campuses to feel that the TeleCampus was a service entity for them, individually and collectively. Fortunately, Regent Sanchez understood exactly what I was talking about on both fronts, and the suggestion was never made again.

There are other stakeholders who have had a huge influence on what we do but who still don’t quite understand us, or understand why online education has become so popular. It’s a little disheartening when I give a presentation about all the students we reach and how high our course completion rates are and I get a comment about the value of running tracks and trees on a college campus and a question about how we can possibly replicate those online. That’s when I wish I could scream, “The students we serve don’t care about the track or the trees on a campus!” But of course I do not, or at least I don’t scream it. I mean, I’m passionate but I’m not crazy. And is it flexibility or convenience, and does it matter? I was once told that we don’t need to make it easier for these “time shifters,” referring to students who choose to supplement their face-to-face course schedule with an online course here or there because they work, or they have family needs, or they simply do not want to get up early on Tuesdays and Thursdays to sit in a four hundred-person auditorium and listen to a teaching assistant lecture. Regardless of how people look at online education, whether they like it or not, or if it bothers them because it makes access too easy, the online train is rolling full blast and it’s not going back to the station now.

Generally speaking, some of our most influential stakeholders see us as only a technology shop. It’s not their fault since most of them have not been on the development and delivery side of an online course. They may think that it’s simply a matter of a professor making class notes into a pdf and/or posting PowerPoint slides (and even adding audio!!), requiring a reading assignment or maybe a post or two in the discussion
forum, and then providing some type of assessment. Some may stop at the posting of the slides. At any rate, we all know that developing a quality online course takes much more effort than that. Without experiencing it themselves, it’s probably unfair to expect them to really understand. So our endless job is to help them see that technology is only one part of what we do. UT TeleCampus and its staff are about teaching and learning, technology, marketing, and student services, and about making our suite of services available for our fifteen institutions and the students we serve together.

I have worked hard to build positive relationships with our various stakeholders over the years. Chancellors have come and gone, regents have come and gone, campus presidents, deans, and faculty members have come and gone. But the students keep coming, and they are coming in larger and larger numbers. By far the majority of our stakeholders do understand what we do and understand the need to meet this growing population. Furthermore, they embrace this innovative way to reach new students. We continue to have innovative members on our Board of Regents, as well as chancellors and presidents. I have found that those who are the most innovative seek to know more about the online world, and whenever possible, I try to deliver. As a result, I now have a strong set of mentors who help to guide me in challenging situations. As I said previously—it’s really all about relationships.

To date, my success rate in educating and convincing stakeholders that what we do is a benefit to our university system is about 70/30. Some can see the systemic changes that have taken place across the campuses to benefit a flexible-learning environment, and they think it is good. Others don’t think it’s important, and still others don’t notice at all. Some don’t understand what we do simply because we don’t see or meet with them face to face. Face time with stakeholders is critical, and when you don’t have it—for whatever reason—life can become quite interesting. But does the 70/30 split worry or depress me? No, not most of the time because I am sustained by the lessons I’ve learned over the past twelve years, and I am confident that what we are doing is good for students who want access to high-quality online courses and degree programs. Where better to get those programs than from the University of Texas System?
LESSONS LEARNED

As you might expect, and as a result of my twenty years in distance education, I have learned many lessons. Some were easy, others more difficult. Some of them shouldn’t have had to be learned in the first place, but I think they helped me to understand how to bring flexible online learning into the mainstream across my institutions. I share a few of them with you in no particular order of importance.

1. It is important that a change agent have access to people who have the power to help make the change agent successful. If you are going to do something revolutionary, you have to find champions in high places. Once you find them, hang on to them as long as you can and build your program as well as you can, because the day will undoubtedly come when you have some in power who are definitely not your champions. Having established a solid organization might just carry you through any hard times you may end up facing.

2. You have to prove yourself as someone who can provide assistance and add value—and you must show that you really do know what you are doing. As I mentioned, I work at the administrative level of a large university system. When we started designing the UT TeleCampus, it wasn’t as though the campuses were just sitting there waiting for us with open arms. In a situation like this, or one where you are trying to convince a skeptical audience that flexible learning is the way to go and that your group in particular is the one to go with, proving your value and having a healthy level of confidence may be the best way to gain the trust you need to be successful.

3. Don’t worry about who gets credit. If the bottom line is that you need something to work, find a way to get there. Work with the people who can make it happen. If necessary, guide them through the problem you are facing and, even when you think you already know how to solve it, allow them to reach the same conclusion on their own. So what if they think it’s their idea? You end up getting what you need and they feel a sense of partnership—which is exactly what you want.

4. Understand that you are not a faculty member and therefore will never have the clout to speak to faculty as a peer. Find champions
in that audience and help them to reach out to others. Sometimes faculty are hesitant about putting courses online because they don't want to make a mistake and look bad in front of the students or their colleagues. Your champions can go a long way in making hesitant faculty more comfortable in the online learning environment.

5. I don't think I can say enough about the importance of keeping your cool and remembering the principles of being nice. It almost sounds too easy, but in the ever-changing world of online education, just reaching out and being collegial—as opposed to mandating and/or demanding change—can move an initiative forward much faster. Honest and respectful communication is critical. When I was younger, I didn't know how to bite my tongue very well. When I felt that someone was treating me, my staff, or my organization unfairly, I would defend in a way that made me feel good at the time but that got me nowhere—and certainly didn't change the opinion of the offender. Today, I defend in a way that is much more strategic and much more focused on getting the most positive outcome possible. Rule #1: Write the first email while you are upset to get it out of your system, read it, delete it, wait twelve hours and then write the one you should send. Rule #2: Never pick up the phone when you are upset. See Rule #1.

6. Know which rules to break and ask for forgiveness later, which ones to bend, and which ones to leave alone. The editors of this book asked me to give some examples here. I am of course hesitant because I am still breaking and bending rules (in a good way), but here's one. As mentioned previously, our first program was the collaborative MBA. We announced that we would be developing it, we received a proposal from the eight schools of business that outlined how it would be designed, and we even started course development before we realized we had a serious problem. Since the students would be taking only two courses from each campus including the home campus, we were going to be in direct violation of an accreditation rule regarding a residency requirement. We didn't want to stop the development, so we contacted the accrediting agency, worked with them, and ended up becoming an example of how to do collaborative programs. The newest principles for
accreditation from the agency include a statement that allows for collaborative programs—by breaking a rule, we were able to pave the way for others.

CONCLUSION

If you have dark and stressful moments about working on flexible online learning within one institution, add fourteen to it and welcome yourself to my world. Overall, I would have to say that I love my job, I love the people I work with—okay, most of them—and I love the fact that I’ve been a part of this learning revolution. Have there been moments when I thought I should have gone into a different field? Honestly, no. Even with all of the frustrations and challenges that come with doing something new and different, even when people don’t really understand what we do, even when I’m wrong, I can’t think of anything more exciting than being able to provide vision and ideas about the way to design things like the UT TeleCampus. Anyone who knows me well knows that I’m at my best during the building phase of things and am not one to enjoy the maintenance phase. I’m not always strategic in my planning, but I know enough to surround myself with people who are. I suppose that is another lesson.

The TeleCampus is about to embark on a new project that excites me greatly. There is a growing population of adults who have some college credit but who have not received a credential—a diploma or degree. For the most part, these adults are not interested in driving to a campus to sit in a classroom with fifty to a hundred eighteen- and nineteen-year-olds three days a week. They are not interested in taking time off of work to go to class. And they are definitely not interested in packing up the family and moving to a college town. What they are interested in is a convenient and flexible way to earn a legitimate college degree. Working with some very innovative institutions in the UT System, the TeleCampus will roll out a number of accelerated online bachelor’s degree completion programs in the fall of 2010. This is what it’s all about: providing a flexible learning environment to meet the needs of a target population. Just thinking about how many adults we are going to help in the very near future reminds me that no matter what anyone thinks, what I do is worth it.
POSTSCRIPT

“Texas Kills Its TeleCampus”—such was the Inside Higher Ed online publication headline on 9 April 2010. The day before, I had met with the University of Texas System chancellor and he had informed me that the UT TeleCampus (UTTC) had accomplished its mission and would be closed on 31 August 2010.

When I was asked to write this postscript to explain what happened after I had written the chapter, I wasn't sure where I would start or end. I believe that many colleagues who either wrote about the closure or who wrote to me personally have a pretty good understanding of what happened. But the bottom line is that the decision was made to decentralize online education services for a move that “will allow greater access to UT courses online, leading to improved student success and graduation rates” (from the UT System press release, 8 April 2010). Operationally, each campus in the UT System is now responsible for all things related to distance and online learning on that campus. There are no longer any centralized services like a common course-management system (CMS), marketing services, or a 24/7 help desk, or even a consistent quality-control system, although there are still some common activities among those campuses involved in collaborative degree programs.

It is true that most of the UT campuses are prepared, to some extent, to handle online education. They each already have a CMS and several have robust support centres with strong and experienced leadership. To the inexperienced administrator, it might have looked as though the TeleCampus was a duplication of effort. In truth, however, eliminating the TeleCampus operation means that the UT System campuses now have to duplicate all of the services that were centrally offered through the UT TeleCampus—or not offer them at all. And if they do offer the services, they are now duplicating effort. As for whether this decision will increase or decrease flexibility in the operations and user interfaces of the UT System, that remains to be seen. Clearly, those making the decision to decentralize felt that by doing so the campuses would experience greater flexibility via a smaller, less-coordinated operation. As many colleagues have pointed out, only time will tell if the decision was indeed the right one.
Today, the UT TeleCampus is closed. The entire staff has moved on to other things. For me, the bright side is that staff members of the TeleCampus—from its beginning in 1997 to its end in 2010—are able to take the good work we did and the incredible things we learned, developed, and accomplished, and spread that knowledge and expertise out across the state, our country, and indeed, the entire online education world. When we recall all the accolades we received during those thirteen years, it feels pretty powerful: we can say that there are approximately fifty-plus people now doing great things based on what we did at the TeleCampus. Even if those fifty-plus colleagues are not in the field right now, I know that they are using things they learned from our teamwork at UT TeleCampus.

Personally, I learned more in the past three years about professional relationships and trust than in all the other years of my career combined. Call it my “coming of age,” if you will. My innocent belief that good things happen when you work hard and show success has been shattered. I have become a more “hardened” individual. And, regrettably, I’m less emotionally charged than I once was. It was a rough time for me personally and I still carry some guilt over what happened. What could I have done differently to prevent this? And it doesn’t matter when people tell me that the decision was not my fault—if you are a good leader, you take responsibility for what happens to your staff. That’s what I believe, anyway.

RECOMMENDED READING


ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Darcy W. Hardy earned her bachelor’s degree in industrial arts, planning to follow in her father’s general contracting footsteps. As her senior year drew to a close, she decided to get her master’s degree in education—with an industrial technology major and a counseling and guidance minor. Truth was, she really just wanted to keep going to school. The next step was a doctorate. She dropped the industrial focus and switched to an instructional focus. After her PhD, Darcy landed her first distance-learning position in 1989. For twenty-one years she has thoroughly enjoyed changing minds about distance learning and, of course, making other people eat their words as she and her staff overcame significant operational and political challenges to deliver innovation for greater flexibility in higher education. Darcy is Assistant Vice Provost for Education Technology Initiatives at the University of Texas at San Antonio. In January 2011, she began a one-year appointment with the Obama Administration through the Department of Labor, working on various department initiatives with a focus on the use of online education. www.utsa.edu/oit/about_oit/OIT_DHardy.html.