

# Community Colleges and the Community: How Leaders Can Ensure Their College Meets Local Needs

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Community college leaders have a pivotal role to play in creating partnerships between local organizations committed to serving their local communities.

More than ever, public and not-for-profit organizations must find new ways to leverage their resources as the traditional public tax base and private sources are no longer dependable. Concurrently, the missions of public entities are expanding. Public schools, colleges, universities and not-for-profits have operated independently of each other with, perhaps, formal but unmonitored agreements to minimally help students move from one system to the other. However, very little engagement among these sectors exists as all are busy trying to fulfill their individual missions and raise funds to remain viable.

Engaging collaboratively and purposefully across these boundaries provides opportunities to leverage resources and better achieve each partner's mission. Failing to do so limits each organization's potential to achieve its purpose.

The way different organizations function—competing agendas, bureaucracies as well as the increasing internal demands upon leadership—make “working outside” very challenging. The energy required to establish stable, productive relationships can become a major distraction that makes such relationships tenuous. Yet, organizational performance models, such as the Malcolm Baldrige approach, encourage partnerships because of their potential to improve organizational performance through “Systems Integration.”

Leveraging these potentially beneficial relationships so that everyone can do more and achieve the win-win critical for a partnership to succeed requires someone to lead, which is the perfect role for community colleges. After all, it’s not just because of the old adage “community is our middle name,” but because we are actually the bridge to and from almost anything to do with human development and services. Becoming proactive beyond one’s usual circle of partners is an opportunity and most “outside” organizations are increasingly interested in being included, for the same reason. This requires that leadership pursue a deliberate, focused and intentional persistence in order to develop successful relationships that result in long-term mutual benefit. The community college usually has more experience and often staff who are or can be assigned to help the community college president build the network it takes for broad community-wide engagement to occur.

The Alamo Colleges has become especially successful in building broad coalitions that are expanding not only our direct resources but increasing grant and public special financing that supports our not-for-profit and educational community’s mutual, shared goals. We utilize a simple model developed by Patrick Lencioni in [The Advantage: Why Organizational Health Trumps Everything Else in Business](#), which identifies “five behavioral principles that every team must embrace.”[1]

Since the goal is to build a team of diverse but collaborative community organizations, these team principles are equally important. They are:

1. Trust
2. Conflict
3. Commitment
4. Accountability
5. Results

Simply stated, trust nurtures productive conflict that leads to commitment with accountability leading to desired results.

The challenge is in managing the relationships. The key is to use all one’s resources. Trustees can be especially effective in connecting and resolving issues with other public entities with boards. Universities are so decentralized that it can be very difficult to establish the dialogue so necessary to achieve the partnership’s objectives. The university president may delegate to the provost, to the dean and to the chair and it’s easy to get stuck. So, the ability to engage the university president directly may be critical to the project’s success. Elected officials require a different set of protocols and usually the community college president must personally engage; this is true also with employers.

The point is that the community college president can't just delegate this work but must invest the personal time and energy to establish the partnerships, set them in motion and use multiple strategies to secure the relationship over time. Members of the team are crucial but the president should continue to monitor and engage personally to ensure the partnership grows and prospers. This establishes the fundamental foundation of **trust**. Then, the president and their team must continue to manage the healthy **conflicts** that will emerge and nurture the momentum. The most difficult problems are solved when the president remains engaged. Too often, partnerships fail when the CEO withdraws and delegates everything. This **commitment** of the president and their team is what leads to the desired **results**.

At Alamo Colleges, we have built five major community-based networks using this model. They are:

*Access and Completion Consortium:* Business leaders, elected officials, community-based organizations, secondary schools (Independent School Districts or ISD's in Texas), and universities are building a regional advising system to ensure a "warm handoff" for all students in the region as they progress from 9<sup>th</sup> grade through the baccalaureate degree;

*ISD/Alamo Colleges Consortium:* The superintendents and board chairs of our 55 ISDs and charter schools in our 8-county region, meet twice a year to increase college access, expand dual credit/early college high school programs and pursue other mutual strategies;

*The University Transfer Compact:* To increase successful student university transfer and baccalaureate attainment, we joined with Austin Community College and 9 area universities to ensure precise, clear and effective alignment of curricula in order to maximize student degree attainment and minimize the loss of credits, money and time to degree;

*SAWORKS:* Former Mayor Ivy Taylor and County Judge Nelson Wolf, the San Antonio Chamber of Commerce, the Alamo Colleges District and the area economic and workforce development agencies developed a coordinated approach to identifying areas of workforce need and increase highly skilled graduates capable of filling the available positions. The program is increasing internships for high school and college students, expanding programs through strategic investments and ensuring local talent is recruited, educated and employed;

*AlamoSUCCESS:* The United Way and several of their key agencies are collaborating with the Alamo Colleges to provide support for our economically marginal students who are frequently homeless, hungry and otherwise struggling to stay in college.

These five models are prospering because the Alamo Colleges partnered with our traditional peers in new ways and expanded partnerships with government, business and not-for-profits not previously included in our traditional networks. We've enhanced these partnerships building them into our strategic plan, our business model. Our progress has been strengthened by our utilization of Lencioni's Five Principles and our team's willingness, including the trustees, to lead, build these networks and commit to establishing and maintaining trust in order to leverage each other's assets and achieve mutual results.

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*References*

[1] Lencioni, Patrick; *The Advantage: Why Organizational Health Trumps Everything Else in Business*. Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, 2012; pp. 26-71.