

Partnership Characteristics and Barriers

According to *Transitions*, the 2017 Annual Report of the ATS Commission on Accreditation, institutions of theological higher education in America “are in a time of transition . . . and adjusting to new realities and the public religious sphere.” The Commission outlines the following ten forms of transition that are increasing among member schools:

1. Staff leadership changes,
 2. Shifts in dominant educational models,
 3. Changes in the sequencing and location of theological education,
 4. Increased global engagements,
 5. Shifts in student demographics,
 6. Shift from peer-group study to grant-funded projects,
 7. Shift toward sustainable practices and programs,
 8. Increased movement toward mergers and collaborations among member schools,
 9. Redevelopment of the accrediting standards, and
 10. Change in leadership among 50% of member schools.
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In his article, *Ten Elements in Successful Collaboration*, Dr. Robert Cooley, former president of Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, outlines ten valuable characteristics of institutions interested in establishing viable educational partnerships.

1. Effective collaboration is built on a foundation of trust, openness and mutual reciprocity.
 2. Effective collaboration focuses on the what and why (outcomes) rather than on the how (structure and technical detail).
 3. Effective collaboration is board and leadership-driven.
 4. Effective collaboration requires complementary mission statements and a shared vision.
 5. Effective collaboration depends on a phased process—one that begins with achievable programs or operations, and then expands as strength directs.
 6. Effective collaboration concentrates on common bonds, such as mission, vision and values, while acknowledging differences.
 7. Effective collaboration depends on having one well-resourced, lead institution around which to design a legal partnership.
 8. Effective collaboration entails a study process that carefully delineates the major stakeholders: governing board, faculty, students, alumni, donors, and ecclesial and professional bodies and relationships.
 9. Effective collaboration provides the stakeholders with a deep sense of participation and ownership in the study and negotiating process.
 10. Effective collaboration generates frequent communication with stakeholders and invites them to join the process through prayer and conversation.
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In their guidebook, *Partnerships: Framework for Working Together* (2010), the Compassion Capital Fund (CCF), administered by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, outlines the following ten fundamental principles and standards for advancing a successful partnership strategy:

1. Need for Partnership
 2. Clarity of Leadership
 3. Clarity of Understanding
 4. Different cultures/practices
 5. Clear Purpose
 6. High Commitment Levels
 7. Trust
 8. Clear Working Arrangements
 9. Performance Management Systems
 10. Learning/Exchanges of Good Practices
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Apart from describing the characteristics of a healthy partnership, the CCF Guidebook delineates fifteen barriers that impede the development of successful partnerships. Leaders of theological schools and seminaries would do well to utilize the following list to evaluate their respective institutional cultures before ambitiously embarking on any partnership strategy.

1. Limited vision/failure to inspire
2. One partner manipulates or dominates, or partners compete for the lead
3. Lack of clear purpose and inconsistent level of understanding purpose
4. Lack of understanding roles/responsibilities
5. Lack of support from partner organizations with ultimate decision-making power
6. Differences of philosophies and manners of working
7. Lack of commitment; unwilling participants
8. Unequal and/or unacceptable balance of power and control
9. Key interests and/or people missing from the partnership
10. Hidden agendas
11. Failure to communicate
12. Lack of evaluation or monitoring systems
13. Failure to learn
14. Financial and time commitments outweigh potential benefits
15. Too little time for effective consultation