



## **APLU Institutional Consortium Initiative**

### **Summary of “Functions” Webinar Series:**

#### **What functions should an institutional consortium serve?**

**BACKGROUND:** APLU has received a \$268,920 grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to explore the creation of an independent, self-governing, non-profit higher education consortium for institutional cooperation and collaboration. Technology is rapidly changing the way students access information and the way they learn. A consortium would be in a position to capture the great economies of scale inherent in information technology to improve learning for students while containing costs.

The grant will support conceptual design and initial formation of a consortium. APLU hopes to achieve agreement on a design and commitment in principle to membership from a large number of institutions, including universities and community colleges, by the summer of 2013. There is also modest funding to support faculty specification of content for up to five courses, although not enough at this moment for actual course development.

**“FUNCTIONS” WEBINAR SERIES:** A series of four webinars (90 min. each) gave participants in the Institutional Consortium initiative an opportunity to weigh in and discuss possible functions that an institutional consortium might serve. Sixty-two participants from 40 different institutions, including universities, university systems, community colleges, and other educational organizations, joined the conversation. Both administrators and faculty were represented in this mix. Participants were given a list of potential functions and asked to discuss and elaborate on functions they would find useful (for the list of functions, see material posted on the APLU website, click Major Initiatives tab, click Institutional Consortium tab).

**NEXT STEPS AND SUMMARY OF WEBINAR SERIES INPUT:** All participants will be given the opportunity to respond to a web-based survey, to be distributed within the next few weeks, that will help determine the primary initial functions to be served by the institutional consortium. The survey will reflect input on possible functions generated by APLU staff and input from the webinar series.

Here is what participants who joined the webinar series told us that a consortium could do:

**Put colleges and universities in the “drivers seat” when it comes to designing, selecting, and licensing courseware.** Multiple participants are concerned that a few commercial or institutional vendors will soon drive what is available for license and thus drive up costs while limiting flexibility. A consortium of users, promising a potential mass market of student enrollees, could drive the market to produce better products at more affordable costs.

**Create opportunities for collaboration across educational sectors.** Participants see the need for collaboration between universities and community colleges if we are to increase access and reach large numbers of students, getting them the courses they need to earn degrees. Participants would also like to see the consortium work across professional associations, such as APLU and AASCU.

**Help institutions manage and cross barriers to institutional collaboration within and across states.** Participants shared concern about competition among institutions within a single state and across several states and felt that a consortium could show faculty, administrators, and legislators how collaboration could work to save costs for individual institutions without giving up their individual brand identity.

**Help institutions deal with the swiftly changing environment for instructional technology and on-line education.** Participants confirmed that by banding together, institutions could keep abreast of latest developments and be more effective in assuring the quality of on-line course materials and offerings. They could address common challenges in adopting such courseware.

**Provide opportunities for faculty to work together to design instruction, do research, and participate in professional development opportunities to help them use on-line learning systems; and create ways to recognize and compensate for such faculty work.** Finding ways to engage faculty in successful collaborative approaches to instruction is a challenge, some see this as easier to do in community college settings than universities. Others see the consortium as an opportunity to share faculty development programs and to develop best practices for recognizing faculty collaborative work. Still others see the opportunity for the consortium to form social networks of faculty who simply share common interests, whether for educational purposes or research.

**Managing scale and assuring quality when offering or participating in massive open online courses (MOOCs).** Concerns were raised about how to judge and assure course quality when courses are made available for credit to large numbers of students who come from diverse backgrounds and are variously prepared to handle course content. The “brain power” of several working together in a consortium could better address MOOC challenges and opportunities.

**Evaluate the quality of on-line instructional materials and platforms, specific courses, and student learning.** The consortium could take on several evaluation projects, offering a public service to define quality in on-line instruction and to rate the quality of on-line course materials and learning platforms. It could also address the knotty problem of accurately assessing student learning in a hybrid or on-line environment.

**Use the leveraging power of multiple institutions to achieve common aims more effectively.** Multiple institutions could band together to negotiate with vendors to lower costs, share assets to license high-quality, costly instructional software or pay for costly course design and development, and convince legislative bodies of the value of institutional investment in certain kinds of courseware.

**Deal with the issue of institutional dependence on a limited number of instructional software platforms, some of which might not ultimately prove viable in the competitive market.** A lot of discussion centered on the expensive dependency on learning management software and the emerging market for adaptive learning software. Some felt the consortium could serve as a way to bring developers together or establish criteria and standards for effective instructional software platforms and decrease institutional vulnerability to vendors whose products may lose momentum over time and cease to be supported.

**Provide standard templates for dealing with property rights for collaborative work and faculty instructional materials produced with significant institutional investment.** The consortium could serve as a way to share best practices here and provide common templates for handling property rights and institution-to-institution agreements to collaborate.

**Deal with restrictions on sharing student data across institutional or state boundaries.** Massive courses produced within adaptive learning systems can yield sophisticated data about student learning, interactivity, and preparedness, and also collect valuable information about the demographic characteristics of students who do or don't succeed in the adaptive on-line environment. These data can provide rich ground for research and quality improvements—but only if the data can be shared across institutions. A consortium could assist institutions in working out the legal/policy arrangements to allow such sharing and to benefit from subsequent research.