

Multiplier Effects: Designing Transformational University-Industry Collaborative Centers

Patricia Bou
Principal, Education Practice
Co-Director
CannonDesign

Chris Lambert
SVP, Strategy Consulting
Co-Lead
Blue Cottage of CannonDesign

Brief overview

By making smart, strategic decisions in the planning and design of collaborative centers, universities and commercial partners can see mutual benefits that transform the relationship among partners. Whether a standalone hub or one that is integrated in an academic building, a research hub, or even a residence hall, these centers can have outsized impact when they are well designed.

Use in U-I engagements outside of major metropolitan areas

While federal and private-sector investments disproportionately funnel toward urban areas, smaller non-urban communities have notable opportunities to create well-designed centers that support transformational collaboration. Future transformation requires a thoughtful approach that both draws on the institution's strengths and targets specific areas of opportunity for further co-investment.

Key features

The most successful centers attract commitments from organizations outside the university and offer students a dynamic work environment, encouraging them to develop valuable post-matriculation skills. They share some common characteristics:

- **Space that encourages shared experimentation:** Starting from a well-designed foundation of space that supports choices of setting based on the varied nature of work—from private or even confidential space to highly collaborative and even social space. Amenities matter, and even modest food service capabilities have become a defining feature.
- **Flexible technology for distributed collaboration:** In an increasingly hybrid world, an ability to connect instantaneously with partners is a major factor. New centers include opportunities for in-person and remote collaboration among industry partners with academic units on site.
- **Cutting through institutional boundaries:** Given the cross-disciplinary nature of industry and interest in casting a strategic net for partners, all of the recent centers we've seen include participation from multiple academic disciplines and most also encompass participation from various business units.



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Key takeaways

- The multiplier effect based on the successful collaboration should be a **well-defined, comprehensive measure that encompasses multiple data** (e.g., student and faculty participation rates, research and development activity, new venture starts) in addition to funding levels.
- **An ongoing budget to adapt space, technology, and calendar of programming is necessary** to support the success of the center.
- Centers can increase their success via **openness to continuous improvement** by regularly evaluating the strategies that work most successfully for the institution and a **commitment to adapting the structure of the center** in response to the data.

Resources required

For universities that lack a successful center, the first step is often an environmental scan and market assessment—whether completed by the institution or with the help of a consultant—to establish the conditions for success. Leveraging the strategic assets in place for a given institution draws on a comprehensive analysis of regional economic strengths, the institution’s employment placements and alumni network, and high-level understanding of the current and projected social and political context. Designing a transformational center grows out of this strategic analysis and often requires working with an experienced partner that can creatively integrate the center into the institution’s setting.

Best practice examples

- At **Miami University in Oxford, Ohio**, the [McVey Data Science Building](#) is designed to support an interdisciplinary program in data science. The stakeholders include academic departments representing four different colleges within the university as well as several multi-disciplinary centers that allow students and faculty to work with industry partners.
- The **University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign** is developing its new [Illini Hall](#) with a ground floor space to support external partners who will collaborate with the university’s students and faculty on projects including the supercomputing center. Academic faculty and students from mathematics, statistics, and computer science share a stake in the success of the interdisciplinary center, which will host a range of projects—from ongoing collaborations requiring specialized security clearance to short-term industry-sponsored competitions and projects.
- **SUNY Albany** has established several industry partnerships at its new [ETEC research campus](#), which is focused on emerging technology and entrepreneurship. The new campus includes representation from multiple distinct colleges and sets aside permanent research space for several external partners, including the National Weather Service’s Regional Forecast Office, the state’s Homeland Security and Emergency Services, and private partners such as TruWeather Solutions LLC. Furthermore, an incubator enables student and faculty entrepreneurs to ideate and develop early-stage ideas for businesses.