



# The Impacts of Innovative Institutions in Higher Education

*Edited by*  
Noah Coburn · Ryan Derby-Talbot



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*In thanks for the students who have helped push higher educational institutions in innovating and enriching directions.*

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# Introduction: How Innovative Institutions Enrich Higher Education

*Noah Coburn and Ryan Derby-Talbot*

## DEEP SPRINGS COLLEGE

Isolated in a desert valley north of Death Valley in eastern California sits tiny Deep Springs College. On a recent morning at 4:30 am, first-year student Grace makes the chilly walk from the dormitory to the dairy to milk the College's two dairy cows. This is her required labor position for the term, which, despite its early hours, happens to be one of the most coveted student labor positions. After milking the cows and bringing the milk to the boarding house to pasteurize, Grace will catch a few more hours of sleep before attending classes in composition and discrete mathematics later in the morning. She has another shift of milking to do in the late afternoon, before attending a meeting after dinner of the predominantly student-staffed "Communications Committee," which manages

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the College website and the majority of its marketing and external communications. After a few hours of reading for class and finalizing a speech for tomorrow's weekly public speaking event, she will go to sleep in anticipation of another early morning.

Deep Springs was founded in 1917 by L.L. Nunn to serve as an alternative higher educational model for young men. While the trends in universities of this era reflected a growing emphasis on disciplinary specialization and job preparation, Deep Springs' program harkened back to classical principles of liberal arts education, however with two added components: student labor on the College cattle ranch, and student self-administered governance over their own affairs, including dormitory management and the power to disinvite fellow classmates. These combined "pillars" of a liberal arts-based education, student labor, and self-governance were meant to instill in young men the development of character and a lifelong commitment to serve humanity. The isolation ensured the creeping distractions of the external world would not dilute this formative experience.

After more than a century, Deep Springs still retains its central features and has been highly successful in meeting its educational goals. The College continues to be isolated in the valley in which it sits, with its 200-acre cattle ranch and alfalfa farm. The student body remains tiny, with between 25 and 30 members. Students stay at the College only two years before transferring to other institutions (often prestigious—Ivy League institutions, for example, are frequent). The pillars of academics, labor and self-governance remain the central features of the program. Indeed, although the campus now includes Wi-Fi (in all buildings except the student dormitory—by student decision) and books are now delivered as part of the daily deliveries from UPS and FedEx, many students still write hand-written notes in their notebooks, wear beat-up Western-style clothing and boots, and request hard copies of books and articles in lieu of their digital counterparts. Just as at its founding, escaping the corrupting and materialistic influences of modernity remains a central theme at Deep Springs.

Despite remaining committed to its founding principles, much about the College has also changed and evolved (cf. Newell, 2015). Indeed, it has become remarkably competitive to get into, typically admitting only 5% of its applicants. The College course catalog has expanded from canonical courses in English, mathematics, languages, and Western philosophy to now include a range of interdisciplinary courses across the liberal arts. Most notably, the College transitioned from an all-male to a co-educational institution in 2018.

While Deep Springs College is unique in its setting and in the ways that its values are embedded in its classes and structures, it is a part of a wider class of innovative schools that share deep, overlapping values and offer unique potential paths forward for higher education. Some of these other institutions, including some founded by Deep Springs alumni, reflect a clear Deep Springs influence: Outer Coast College, Tidelines Institute, Thoreau College, Gull Island Institute, to name a few. There are other colleges that share Deep Springs' commitment to student work as a critical programmatic feature: Berea College, Paul Quinn College, Sterling College, and Warren Wilson College, for example. A few even reflect significant levels of student self-governance and participation in shared governance of the college in general, for example the recent Marlboro College in Vermont. Others have more structural similarities such as the emphasis on narrative evaluation at Bennington College, Hampshire College, and elsewhere.

The thesis of this book is that experimental, innovative colleges enrich higher education as a whole. They do this both internally for their own students, and also externally by contributing new and different approaches that can potentially be adopted and expanded by other institutions. Innovative institutions enhance the higher educational ecosystem, as new approaches and practices grow out of these institutions based on experiments that are not merely piecemeal, but cohere with deep and long-standing philosophical commitments. While there can be challenges designing and maintaining institutions with such deep philosophical commitments, the most effective innovations have been those that have taken root across institutions as a whole, intertwined in as many layers of the school as possible—from the board of trustees to the students themselves. The chapters that follow share many of the lessons can be learned from institutions grounded in this kind of innovative identity.

Historically, the small, innovative schools like those featured in this book have had subtle but outsized impacts on the rest of higher education. What once might have been considered radical features of these schools—interdisciplinary programs, for example—are now increasingly found in mainstream institutions. As many higher educational institutions are now facing increasing pressures due to costs, shifting demographics, mental health challenges, post-pandemic effects, polarized political climates and other factors, it is important to look for new approaches. The institutions featured here are able to do more than share ideas, they serve as models of how new ideas can be developed from within. Their success has been the result of anchoring innovation in an institutional culture and

identity. We believe the inventions, perspectives and lessons of these institutions will be of use to higher educational institutions as a whole facing the prospects and challenges of change.

### THE LEGACY OF BLACK MOUNTAIN COLLEGE

On the other side of the country from Deep Springs one finds Camp Rockmont for Boys, a Christian Camp just west of the North Fork of the Swannanoa river in the hills of western North Carolina. One can visit and not realize that the camp sits on the former campus of Black Mountain College—an experimental college that was founded in 1933 and brought together arts and students in a collaborative learning community. The school had no grades, and students were meant to tell the school when they felt their learning was complete. As with Deep Springs, faculty and students lived and worked together, sharing in the work of maintaining the school. Students and faculty collaborated together, and in some instances these collaborations had a long lasting effect on American culture.

For instance, on an evening in August 1952 faculty member John Cage organized a performance in the dining hall. The student audience sat facing each other as Cage read passages on Zen Buddhism, M.C. Richards read poetry from the top of a ladder, and David Tudor played the piano while Edith Piaf records were played at double speed. Merce Cunningham danced around Roberts Rauschenberg's paintings and the others while being chased by a dog. The event, called "Theater Piece No. 1" is considered the first "happening," and created a new world of performance and interactive work that blossomed in the 1960s (Cage, 1952).

It was also typical of the way in which Black Mountain college brought together faculty and students, who ate together, worked the land, and made art. The college was a center of new thinking in higher education, a progressive approach to learning and community that captured the hearts and minds of its attendees. Then, buried in debt, in 1957 the college closed.

Despite its brief, counterculture existence, Black Mountain College helped change the way that many have thought about higher education. From early its conceptions (cf. Ates, 2022) through its maturation, Black Mountain's contributions included new understandings of experiential learning, the relationship between fine and liberal arts, and the importance and value of paying attention to the learning of individual students. Indeed, its legacy is still being felt—in July 2022, The New York Times Style Magazine published an article entitled "Why Are We Still Talking About Black Mountain College?" (Fortini, 2022). The College remains

intriguing in part because of the list of artists, writers, and thinkers the school attracted, including poet Mary Caroline Richards, mathematician Max Dehn, musician John Cage, architect Walter Gropius, and painter Dorothea Rockburne.

A deeper reason for Black Mountain's continued intrigue is the ripple effect of the institution and others like it—many of its artists and thinkers went on to found new institutions and reshape others. For example, former president Josef Albers left to set up the first design department at Yale, and sculptor Ruth Asawa went on to establish the San Francisco School of the Arts. More importantly, however, the school asked a series of questions that continue to be at the center of many pedagogical debates: what is the relationship between art and scholarship? What is the relationship between work and learning? What do vibrant learning communities look like? How do we create curricula that support students most fully? What is the point of grades, and do we even need them?

Long past its closing, many of the experiments from Black Mountain College have found new life at a variety of schools and colleges across North America. The College was, in some sense, a greenhouse for growing new ideas in higher education, ideas that ultimately took root elsewhere. Surveying the higher education landscape, past the Ivy League and traditional state colleges, one can begin to see evidence of these ideas and others sprouting up in a range of institutions, evidence of innovation from grass roots endeavors.

Yet Black Mountain College also demonstrates some of the precarity of innovative colleges. Over the past decades, many have either closed, merged with other more mainstream institutions, or become more mainstream on their own. Chapters in this book discuss the particular cases of Marlboro College (chapter "[Webs of Connection and Moments of Friction: Dynamics of Ownership and Relationship Between Students and Faculty at a Small Innovative College](#)") and Quest University (chapter "[When Innovative Institutions Fail: Quest University, Partnerships, Financial Sustainability](#)"), but there are a long list of others, including The University of Wisconsin Experimental College, Shimer College, Commonwealth College, Antioch University, The Experimental College at Berkeley, and Monteith College at Wayne State University. This list suggests that while it is difficult to innovate, it is even more challenging to stay innovative. We note the particular challenges correlated with size—whereas the innovative schools we consider are often small, which makes them nimble, they also tend to be resistant to bureaucratic structures which might provide more stability (like investing in endowments



instead of new programs). This suggests the need to think more deeply about what can make an innovative institution (ironically) sustainable for the long term.

Innovation and reform in higher education tend to come in waves. Many of the institutions that have produced notably experimental models of higher education were directly or indirectly founded on the principles of various progressive eras, including the key moments of the late 1920s/early 1930s, the late 1960s/early 1970s, and the 2000s. Some, like Deep Springs College, have remained closely aligned with their founding precepts. Others, like Black Mountain College, have closed. Others still have continued to evolve and remake themselves in a variety of ways. Their trajectories fall across a spectrum, from those that have remained relentlessly innovative, to those who have become more conventional, usually as a result of needing to cope with financial pressures. All have lessons worth sharing about how institutional innovation can and should be cultivated. The chapters of this book reflect a range of trajectories, from successes to failures, that help one understand how innovation can be successful and long-lasting. These lessons hold particular value at this moment—potentially a new moment of reform—as we are witnessing what appears to be unprecedented disruption in higher education in North America.

### THE NECESSITY AND CHALLENGE OF INNOVATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

The word “innovation” has unfortunately become a buzzword in modern higher educational discourse. Typically, it means some kind of programmatic rearrangement or adoption of new features in an institution, such as hybrid learning or stackable credentials. However, this interpretation of innovation can often be reductive. As Historian Steven Mintz recently pointed out: “The primary objective [of many innovations] was not to enrich the educational experience. It was to expedite time to degree and maximize completion rates while cutting costs” (Mintz, 2021). While efficiency is certainly an important factor to consider, true innovation requires going much deeper into questions of purpose and mission.

In particular, it is important not to hang questions of innovation entirely on technological developments. While technology can provide new formats and opportunities, it does not necessarily support the development of deeper understandings of teaching and learning. As Bryan Alexander has argued:

Thanks to the creation and sharing of digital content through the Internet, would-be learners have access to more materials and experts than ever before. Encyclopedia entries, videos, audio lectures, personal blogs written by experts, courses, textbooks, games, galleries, and entire libraries await the inquiring mind. Yet this educational bonanza has not translated into vibrancy for postsecondary institutions. (Alexander, 2020, p. 3)

The true opportunity of innovation is not found in choosing which feature to adopt or technological platform to implement, but in asking deeper questions about students, teaching, and learning. Breakout rooms in Zoom provide a technological structure, but they do not necessarily help students have deeper and more meaningful discussions. Offering a new major in data science may give students a new curricular option, but it does not automatically help them see the more entangled human and ethical issues emerging in the digital age. Innovation should center first and foremost on the student experience.

Here we return to the thesis of this book: higher education needs innovative institutions founded in deep philosophical commitments. Such institutions help ensure that key questions about the purpose and forms of education remain alive, provide creative soil for growing new ideas, and equip students with an enhanced range of options for meaningful educational experiences. They keep the discourse about higher educational innovation thick and grounded in experience. They help prevent the word “innovation” from decaying into a clichéd understanding. The lessons and insights shared in the chapters that follow are meant to help enrich conversations that all educators can have about making productive change in service to students and in facing challenges.

### DEEPER INNOVATION: AN EXAMPLE AT BENNINGTON COLLEGE

At Bennington College, towards the middle of each term, each faculty member steps out of their classroom and a student takes over. The student guides the remaining students in a conversation, asking, how is the class going? What aspects are working well? Which ones are not? What do the students want the professor to know about their experiences? Are there things that could be done differently? Sometimes the questions are straightforward: is the syllabus clear? And other times, they dig into the social dynamics of the classroom: does everyone feel comfortable speaking during class?

The student then takes the feedback to the faculty member, who responds to the class during the next session. The process is not always smooth. Sometimes these conversations are tense. Student feedback is not always tactful, and new instructors, in particular, are not always comfortable being told by students they are doing something “wrong.” Faculty often need to be open to criticisms for the subsequent discussion to be productive. Nonetheless, most of the time, these exchanges produce real, meaningful, honest feedback and consequently better courses. They highlight that individuals learn differently and that each class ultimately experiences the class differently. Open, frank and—at times—tense conversations, can make learning better. Both the faculty member and the students want the course to succeed and this is one way to help make that happen.

At many other schools, student evaluations of teaching have gone in the opposite direction. They have become less personalized, happening after a course is finished, using simple Likert scales and basic rubrics. The stakes are still high (and sometimes contentious), since this information is often used in faculty review and evaluation processes. And yet, in such settings, the student feedback is too late to impact the course for which it was meant. It does not allow for meaningful conversations between students and faculty about how the course is going when it matters most. Concerns about student bias in instructor evaluations are not able to become teachable moments in course discussion. Any pedagogical benefit is reserved for when the professor teaches a later version of the course. All too often, the feedback is simply forgotten.

This is not the case for the midterm conversations held at Bennington. The process has many secondary effects and is deeply ingrained in the culture of the school. The conversations make faculty more likely to think about the student experience while designing their courses. It also makes students much more likely to think about their own learning: what am I getting out of this course? How is it helping my wider learning goals?

A version of these feedback conversations has been in place throughout Bennington’s near century-long existence. Every few years students and faculty get together to rethink the timing or format of these conversations, a productive process for the College. Central to Bennington’s institutional identity is the question: how do we keep students at the centers of their own educations? The evolving answers to this question have grounded Bennington’s culture in a spirit of innovation. Bennington has taken an ideal—student agency in their own education—and designed structures that reshape the learning experience in a variety of ways (including

mid-semester feedback discussions). This is more than the implementation of alternative features, it is a coherent approach to education based on a philosophical commitment to student-centered learning. This is what we mean when we use the phrase “deep” or “meaningful innovation”—novel approaches fundamentally grounded in the mission.

### DEEPER INNOVATION COMES FROM A CULTURE OF EXPERIMENTATION

There have been many recent examples of “innovations” in higher education—for example, new online learning platforms, so-called flipped classrooms, reorganized departments, and approaches to better student life and well-being. Each of these can be argued to add value to students’ experiences. But how can different innovations be brought together in a way that is coherent and enriching to an institution as a whole?

As we stated before, successful innovation requires more than adopting new structures or practices. Indeed, there is a risk to grafting new features on top of traditional approaches without really making sense of just what the combination is meant to achieve. Anecdotally, we have seen examples of innovations that work well at one place fail when brought somewhere new, because the new institution is not set up and prepared to implement the idea successfully. To innovate effectively, leaders, faculty, staff, and students need to be willing to engage first with questions of purpose and mission. More importantly, institutions need to be willing to tolerate risk-taking and experimentation in service of those missions. In other words, successful innovation is not a matter of copying, but a matter of tolerating uncertainty in a process of genuine investigation.

The innovative approaches of Deep Springs, Black Mountain, and Bennington Colleges are not a set of interchangeable features that could be easily swapped with each other; rather, each is a set of coherent structures and practices that have arisen out of a unique inquiry into an educational mission. In particular, each came about from a willingness to tolerate uncertainty and tensions that arise in asking deep questions about the purpose of higher education.

Perhaps one of the most wonderful and vexing aspects of education is that it is fundamentally a mysterious process. What proportion of student learning should be based on broad, exploratory pursuits versus deep, specialized experiences? How much should students study different disciplines, singular disciplines, or across disciplines all together? How much of

a curriculum should harken back to traditional subjects versus new fields? What role should students have in deciding pathways for their own studies? Should an institution focus on elitence or access in admitting students? What is most important for students: learning technical skills, or learning “to think”? And just what do we mean by some of the most important educational terms of art—“critical thinking,” “the liberal arts,” and “lifelong learning”? These questions hold opportunities for remarkable insights, if one can avoid trying to answer them too quickly and instead stomach the ambiguities contained therein.

Innovation, if it is to be successful and deep, requires one to be willing to take on these questions and make commitments. It is all too common for institutions not to wrestle with these questions in a coherent way, and as a result produce unclear and indistinct approaches to education that might try to do everything, resulting in a watered down or flat program. In contrast, Deep Springs, Black Mountain, and Bennington College have all made commitments to particular approaches to education that have resulted in distinct features: a liberal arts, labor, and self-governance-based education an isolated cattle ranch; an open and student-directed approach to learning the arts in community; a student-driven approach to curriculum and course development anchored in a philosophy of experiential learning. These institutions still have to wrestle with fundamental questions of education just like anywhere, but their particular commitments have allowed new answers to be given that would not otherwise be possible. This is why experimental institutions are needed: they allow access to new vistas of education that would otherwise remain unseen.

These new vistas also point to the connection between experimental institutions and social justice, which is explored further in several of the chapters. By taking the individual student seriously, these schools, at various social moments, have often been committed to expanding access beyond whoever is a “typical” student during that era. This is true of many of the schools considered in this book—for example Bennington’s focus on women’s students in the 1920s, Marlboro College’s recruitment of returning GIs and other non-traditional students in the 1940s, and the commitment of many of these schools to building racial diverse campuses. In particular, the example of El Colegio Chicano Del Pueblo (chapter “*El Colegio Chicano Del Pueblo: Decolonizing Chicano Education and the Search for Self-Determination*”) shows how innovation can be tied to the movement of a marginalized population seeking justice and clear representation in higher education. These examples point to a wider lesson that we believe parallels the central argument of the book: it is not enough to

build a more diverse student population—diversity is also about the curriculum, the faculty, and the campus itself. Diversity initiatives of all kinds are most likely to succeed when they run through the entire institution.

The institutions featured in this book hardly have the market cornered on innovative approaches to higher education. They nonetheless help reveal insights, perspectives and lessons that are only available from innovation at the institutional level. They illustrate how innovation requires not only structures and practices, but cultures that develop such structures and practices and keep them alive. They show that innovation does not just look one way, and can lead to a variety of different outcomes. Most importantly, these institutions help provide insights about educational approaches that are beneficial to higher education as a whole.

### THE COLLEGES FEATURED IN THIS BOOK

The innovative colleges and universities featured in this book could largely be placed under the banner of “progressive institutions.” While not a term that is universally understood (or even embraced) across these institutions, most were nonetheless born from particular eras of social upheaval and technological disruption, and in line with particular human-centric principals motivating educational reform. Such eras include the decades before the Civil War (e.g. Antioch College, Berea College), the so-called Progressive Era (e.g. Deep Springs College, Bennington College, Black Mountain College, Goddard College, Marlboro College), the countercultural revolution of the late 1960s and early 1970s (e.g. Pitzer College, Prescott College, Johnston Center at the University of Redlands, the Evergreen State College, Hampshire College, the College of the Atlantic) and the “disruptive” period of the early 2000s (e.g. Quest University, College Unbound, Outer Coast College, El Colegio Chicano Del Pueblo). Each of these eras affected change to North American higher education in general; nonetheless, it is these innovative, revolutionary smaller schools that showcase the most radical changes.

The colleges featured here have typically experimented in service to a particular set of values: student-driven educational experiences, direct faculty-student interactions, and foundational principles of democracy and social justice in their learning environments. Many harken back to the philosophy of John Dewey, whose thinking deeply linked ideas about education and democracy, with important emphasis on what it means to be a student in a democratic society (Kramer & Hall, 2018; Kliewer, 1999). The models pay particular attention to the context and individuality of

each learner, resulting in a significant commitment to creating learning communities, which often emphasize values such as social and environmental justice. Indeed, many of these institutions have often pushed the question of who college is for in the first place.

The institutions featured here are typically small. This has allowed them to be nimble and focus on the individuality of students; it also raises questions about scalability and cost—many of the models being expensive to run given the low student-to-faculty ratio. (We take up the issue of scalability in chapter “Beyond “Innovation”: Lessons for Making Change in Higher Educational Institutions”, the book’s conclusion.) Some of the institutions are themselves embedded in larger institutions—New College (chapter “Innovating as an Embedded Program at a Larger State University: New College in Three Pivotal Moments”), Johnston Center (chapter “After Eden: The Civic and Social Potential of Innovative Higher Education”), and, as of recently, Marlboro College (chapter “Webs of Connection and Moments of Friction: Dynamics of Ownership and Relationship Between Students and Faculty at a Small Innovative College”). Others, such as El Colegio Chicano Del Pueblo (chapter “*El Colegio Chicano Del Pueblo: Decolonizing Chicano Education and the Search for Self-Determination*”), are primarily online and still in early developmental stages, but reflect developmental ties to other institutions (e.g. Prescott College). And one example, the University of Montana Western (chapter “Innovative Scheduling: The Intensive Delivery of Higher Education”), shows an entirely different type of institution—an older, public regional institution—recently adopting an innovative approach to teaching. Across these institutions there is a shared emphasis on student-centered learning, and this has led to many common features while also demonstrating a diversity of possible institutional approaches.

How to characterize these institutions? In their edited volume on *Maverick Colleges*, Newell and Reynolds spell out several themes that characterize the “Maverick Colleges” in their work: (1) “Ideals spawning ideas,” often emerging from these moments of social change; (2) “Emphasis on teaching; retreat from research”; (3) “Organization without specialization,” usually a rejection of standard department models; and (4) “Administrative innovation” (Newell & Reynolds, 1996). We find this list to be true to the institutions featured in this book. We nonetheless broaden Newell and Reynolds’ list to include institutions that perhaps were innovative at their founding, but became more traditional, or schools which have been successful in innovating in specific areas, but not others. As a result, there are very few *traits* that appear evident in all the schools

considered, but there are several *conditions* that appear common to the founding of the majority of them:

- A clear founding vision for what makes the school distinct, embodied either in a charismatic founding president, or a small group of dedicated scholars or artists.
- A utopian vision of education and society more broadly. Some institutions have thus situated themselves in isolated settings that are not integrated into local communities, making them intense communities of their own, for instance, with faculty living on campus.
- An eschewing of typical hierarchical academic governance structures. Many of the schools either do not have tenure, or have relatively flat hierarchies without academic ranks (e.g. lacking assistant, associate, full professor designations). Similarly, most have smaller administrations or administrations that are highly composed of faculty members.
- A potentially significant involvement from students in institutional governance, reflecting an institutional commitment to democratic values in learning.
- An evolving commitment to social justice, building off of a valuing of the individual in society, leading many of these schools to champion concepts such as environmental justice, gender equality, LGBTQ+ rights and others.
- A high degree of personal and time commitment from both founding students and faculty, to get the institution launched effectively.
- A body of committed alumni, who can have strong views of education either in opposition to the experimental founding ethos of the schools, or, more likely as strong advocates for some of the original values of the schools.
- Often founded in parallel to social movements agitating for change both inside higher education and in society more broadly.

Not all institutions featured in this book share all of these conditions, but most reflect an expression of change rooted in a deep commitment to student teaching and learning. Interestingly, this commitment has given rise to several similar academic structures within the institutions, although implemented via a diversity of approaches:

- A lack of a disciplinary-based major system, and/or a system that allows for some type of ‘self-designed’ major.
- Non-traditional forms of assessment, including a lack of letter grades, relying instead e.g. on narrative evaluations.



- An expanded emphasis on faculty mentorship. This often accompanies the self-designed aspect of programs, and manifests as a stronger emphasis on faculty advising than is typical.
- More flexible and responsive curricula that tend to change and evolve, not based on a traditional set of long-standing majors.
- For many, an alternative scheduling structure to the typical semester or trimester approach, for example, block plan or low-residency learning.
- For many, an experiential and work-based approach to learning and community building.
- A palpable atmosphere of self-reflection and willingness to rethink learning in new ways. This means several of the schools here have gone through major transitions, changing their structures or even the make-up of their student bodies.

As the keen reader will have observed, many of these characterizations are framed in the negative, as in they say what the institutions are *not*—as in they *don't* have grades and *don't* have majors. Yet what has replaced these structures has often changed and evolved, as the institutions come to understand their models in more positive terms (what they *are*). These schools, despite the initial energy of their founding moments, have also had to deal with longer term questions of sustainability, which can create incentives to ebb back to more conservative approaches.

The similar structures shared across institutions, we believe, comes in part because certain ideals (e.g. student agency) require specific structures (e.g. self-designed courses of study). At the same time, however, it is worth noting how ideas about experimentation have also flowed *between* certain schools. Often, this is more evident after the fact, such as in the case of Black Mountain College which drew artists from schools like Bennington College. More recently, however, the founding of Quest University in 2007 included some founding faculty members and advisors who had worked at other schools with a history of innovation, including Bennington College, St. John's College, and Colorado College. Some members of the Quest University faculty and administration were then a part of the setup of Fulbright University Vietnam in 2018, itself a new, innovative institution. One of the more interesting examples in the book is the case of the University of Montana Western, which implemented the “block plan” from Colorado College in 2005 (as did Quest University in 2007), but adapted it to a different context than that of a liberal arts college. The point is that innovation can occur in networks, and part of our

purpose in writing this book is to share and expand the possible flow of ideas.

Our work here builds on the modest literature discussing innovative colleges and universities, including *Colleges that Change Lives*, *The Innovative Campus*, and *Maverick Colleges*. We were inspired to share more broadly the ideas and conversations we have engaged in within two specific professional organizations: the EcoLeague, and, more significantly, the Consortium for Innovative Environments in Learning (CIEL, which one of the authors serves as the directors of). We hope that this book can help advance the conversation about college and university innovation by adding voices of experience and shared wisdom that have developed at this specific set of institutions over the years. We do not claim that these are the only possible innovative institutions, nor that there is any way to corner the market on “innovation.” We simply aim to share what we find unique and compelling from our institutional learning, about how best to educate students and adapt to change, hopefully contributing insights to others working across the landscape of higher education.

### OUTLINE OF THE BOOK

This book emerged primarily from discussions between leaders at progressive, innovative schools, most of whom are either members of the Consortium for Innovative Environments in Learning (CIEL) or “friend” institutions of CIEL who attend the annual conference. As we were discussing the challenges of our own institutions in this era of disruption in higher education, we realized that many other institutions were facing similar conundrums but that conversations were happening in isolation, and often unaware of the larger histories of innovative institutions one finds abundant in CIEL. Indeed, we feel that innovation in higher education is likely more frequent than we think, but that innovators are largely siloed from and unaware of each other. Noah, as director of CIEL, and Ryan, having been chief academic officer at three CIEL or CIEL-friend institutions, thus put out a call to leaders in our shared network of progressive institutions to reflect on what we felt were the lessons we have learned about effective innovation in higher education via our particular models. After two symposiums and a conference, the authors of this collection have thus drafted a range of chapters that provide what we feel are insightful and inspiring perspectives on what it means to innovate at our unique institutions.

The authors of chapters in this book have served in a variety of roles at different innovative schools. While faculty, students and other administrators were involved in many of the conversations around this volume, ultimately many of the authors tend to be the mid-level administrative level, between the president and the faculty, which is in part intentional. We feel that deans and other leaders in these pivotal positions are often the ones who have to ask most deeply: how do we take the ideals, often exposed by more senior leaders, and turn them into actual workable structures? We believe that this is also a level in our hierarchies that is often ignored. How do we take great teaching in the classroom and scale it up, connecting it to the overarching values of the institution?

While we believe any of these chapters can be read on their own, the order of the chapters is deliberate, taking the reader through an understanding of the history of these innovative institutions, what it is like to study and work at them, how they are confronting certain current challenges, and how they are thinking about the future.

Following this introduction, chapter “[Webs of Connection and Moments of Friction: Dynamics of Ownership and Relationship Between Students and Faculty at a Small Innovative College](#)” gives Jennifer Girouard’s auto-ethnographic account of what it was like to be both a student and a faculty member at Marlboro College, highlighting complementary experiences inside of a strongly student-centered institution. Chapter “[After Eden: The Civic and Social Potential of Innovative Higher Education](#)” offers Patricia Karlin-Neumann and Eli Kramer’s history of innovation and social justice at the Johnston Center at the University of Redlands, including an analysis of interviews from alumni about their consequent efforts towards civic and social engagement as a result of being a student at the Center. In chapter “[Empowering Students Through Evaluation: Over 50 Years Without Grades at Hampshire College](#)”, Laura Wenk discusses the half-century history of narrative evaluations at Hampshire College, relevant particularly given the increasing popularity of the “ungrading” movement in education.

Considering a different model of an innovative school—one embedded inside of a large state university—Julia A. Cherry, John C. H. Miller III, and Natalie Adams analyze three key moments in the history of New College in chapter “[Innovating as an Embedded Program at a Larger State University: New College in Three Pivotal Moments](#)”, discussing the evolution and persistence of the program inside of the larger dynamics of the University of Alabama. In chapter “[El Colegio Chicano Del Pueblo: Decolonizing Chicano Education and the Search for Self-Determination](#)”,

Jerry Garcia and Ernesto Mireles provide a history of the Chicano/a/x movement in higher education, and describe their new and unique approach to Chicano/a/x studies via El Colegio Chicano del Pueblo.

The book then looks at more specific efforts to remain innovative and enhance student learning. In chapter “[Agility or Stability: Can a School Have Both in Faculty Hiring?](#)”, Sarah Harris considers different approaches to hiring and developing faculty at Bennington College, noting in particular the relationship between faculty recruitment and innovation. Christian Gilde then provides an account in chapter “[Innovative Scheduling: The Intensive Delivery of Higher Education](#)” of intensive scheduling structures, including the “block plan” pioneered by Colorado College in 1970 and implemented at the University of Montana Western in 2005. Bringing focus to the importance of relationships in education in chapter “[The Role of Mentoring in Innovative Progressive Institutions](#)”, Laura Wenk returns to discuss the impact and different forms of mentorship at a variety of innovative schools.

The final chapters ask how we evaluate the success of institutions in their attempts to be innovative. In particular, how do we understand the larger trends, impacts and challenges of innovative programs? In chapter “[When Innovative Institutions Fail: Quest University, Partnerships, Financial Sustainability](#)”, Jeff R. Warren discusses the financial challenges of Quest University Canada, and how the ideals of an innovative program cannot avoid the realities of limited institutional resources. In chapter “[Assessment, Outcomes, and Innovation in Higher Education](#)”, Zeke Bernstein raises important questions about outcomes and measurement in higher education, and how they play out uniquely in progressive and innovative schools. Finally, in the book’s conclusion in chapter “[Beyond “Innovation”: Lessons for Making Change in Higher Educational Institutions](#)”, we return to some of the lessons that these innovative schools provide for the rest of higher education.

As we turn to the upcoming chapters, we re-emphasize our central claim: higher education needs innovative institutions, and the wisdom and experience historically innovative institutions can provide. We hope our experiences can enrich the conversations held across many different institutions, and that we can help ensure a robust and resilient ecosystem of higher educational institutions going forward.

### A Partial List of Institutions Discussed by Authors in This Book

**Bennington College** (1932–): 700 students, originally all women’s college, located in Southwestern Vermont with an emphasis on dance and other arts.

*What makes it distinct:* A Plan Process through which students design their own course of study, requiring a strong mentorship system and interdisciplinary work. An annual experiential learning requirement for students to work and study off-campus for six weeks.

**Black Mountain College** (1933–1957): An artist colony-college hybrid in Black Mountain, North Carolina with approximately 1000 students.

*What made it distinct:* Black Mountain’s experimental, interdisciplinary approach grew out of the philosophy of Dewey and favored the arts, including experiential learning and artistic collaboration.

**El Colegio Chicano del Pueblo (The Chicano Peoples College/ CPP)** (2020–): An online educational project of MeXicanos 2070. The goal of this online College and educational curriculum is to bring undergraduate level Xicano studies to a much broader audience using free online learning tools like google classroom and partnerships with accredited universities.

*What makes it distinct:* CPP engages Xicana/o/x community members and other interested people in a unique learning opportunity at the intersection of their own experiences and cultural understanding foregrounded in digital Xicana/o/x classrooms and understood as foundational to an organic political education.

**Deep Springs College** (1917–): Founded as an all-male two-year college on an isolated cattle ranch in California. Deep Springs’ purpose is for students to live a life of service for humanity.

*What makes it distinct:* Its three pillars of academics, labor, and student governance require students to engage intensely in a community of intellectual contemplation, alongside hard work on the ranch and farm, with shared responsibility for communal decision-making. Deep Springs typically has between 25 and 30 students who do not pay tuition and attend for two years before transferring elsewhere. The College became co-educational in 2018.

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**Goddard College** (1935–): Founded originally as a seminary in Central Vermont and later transformed into a progressive residential college with on campus work requirements for students and a long history of political activism.

*What makes it distinct:* Pioneered in 1963, a low residency approach initially aimed at helping adult women with children in particular gain degrees, now is designed for a range of non-traditional learners. Today Goddard is entirely low residency, retaining a strong commitment to social justice and student-centered approaches to education.

**Hampshire College** (1970–): Founded as an alternative and experimenting college based on the New College Plan. The College has a strong social justice commitment. Hampshire is part of a Five College consortium in Western Massachusetts.

*What makes it distinct:* Hampshire students design their own concentration and complete a robust project that is the central activity of their final year of study. The universal capstone comprises a major piece of independent scholarship that demonstrates their ability to handle complex questions and skills in their area of concentration. Hampshire does not have distribution requirements or grades. It uses an evaluation system that consists of contracts, faculty narrative evaluation of student work, student portfolio production, and self-evaluation.

**The Johnston Center at the University of Redlands** (1969–): Founded as Johnston College in 1969, the Johnston educational experiment values student ownership of their education, honoring both individual paths and community engagement. *What makes it distinct:* Students, learning together with each other and with faculty, develop individual course and graduation contracts, elaborating their own educational vision, academic emphasis, and cross-cultural and liberal arts perspectives.

**Marlboro College** (1946–2021, now the Marlboro Institute at Emerson College): Originally, a hilltop residential college in Southeastern Vermont designed to give GIs returning from World War II and other non-traditional students a student-centered approach to education often with an emphasis on the arts. *What makes it distinct:* A self-governing college, with all campus Town Hall meetings, and students who followed self-designed paths of study, often relying on numerous tutorials.

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**New College, Alabama** (1971–): Founded as a small experimental college within the University of Alabama, New College gave students educational agency. Coming from a range of backgrounds and academic abilities, New Collegians built majors from courses across the University called “depth studies,” frequently supplemented by experiential learning, while also receiving liberal arts education in contemporary problem-based seminars. *What makes it distinct:* Subsumed into the College of Arts & Sciences in 1997, New College continues to experiment as an academic department, retaining its emphasis on student agency, inclusive, student-directed learning, experiential learning, and issue-based seminars in student-designed majors.

**Prescott College** (1966–): Guided by a mission for self-directed and experiential learning within an interdisciplinary curriculum, Prescott College offers liberal arts and professional programs at the bachelor’s, master’s, and doctoral levels. *What makes it distinct:* All on-campus and online programs integrate applied problem-based, solution-oriented learning for the environment and social justice; about 80% of graduates report careers that allow them to make a living making a difference.

**Quest University Canada** (2007–2023): Canada’s first non-profit, independent, secular liberal arts college. Quest was an undergraduate-only, residential institution of 650 students in Squamish, British Columbia. *What made it distinct:* No academic departments, small, seminar-style courses on a block plan schedule—each course running for three and a half weeks and students taking only one at a time. Instead of majors, students design individualized “questions” that form their upper division concentration program, culminating in a capstone project.

**The University of Montana Western** (1893–): A small, public university in the American West with approximately 1300 students. *What makes it distinct:* Public university that operates on the block system. The University of Montana Western calls this deep-learning, one-class-at-a-time delivery Experience One. This sequential, experiential learning approach allows students to be exposed to hands-on, competency-based learning in their discipline while focusing on one subject at a time.

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# Webs of Connection and Moments of Friction: Dynamics of Ownership and Relationship Between Students and Faculty at a Small Innovative College

*Jennifer Girouard*

*It is early Fall in Vermont, and the windows are cracked slightly to let in a breeze. The breeze makes the otherwise-stuffy classroom—referred to often as “The Long Room” and situated on the second floor of a converted farm building—more comfortable. It’s my first faculty meeting after having started my new position the month before. I’m sitting against the classroom wall because the long wooden table in the center can accommodate less than half of the approximately 45 faculty and staff in attendance.*

*Two concentric circles of seating around the table make it seem as though the meeting has no leader or hierarchy. I try to keep up with the protocol, and track which people hold what positions (who’s the Dean of Faculty? Is she from Academic Services? That’s the President). Normal clues—seating positions,*

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*time spent speaking, dress—do not suggest titles or status. People dress in casual attire, from wool vests and sweaters to jeans and a button-down, and only first names are used.*

*Partway through the meeting, we shift into a ‘closed meeting,’ in which staff can stay with the faculty, but any students who are present must leave. We’re going to talk about the students directly and individually—ranging across any of the approximately 150 students, from first years who might be struggling to seniors who need extra support on their projects. I feel my face flush and a wave of anxious heat spreads over my body as the realization hits: “Oh my god, does this mean they talked about me when I was a student?” I’m embarrassed to imagine that 20 years ago I could have been the subject of judgment and discussion from my teachers. But then, as a professional, a faculty member, I realize that I’ve never been at an institution in which they did this. Despite teaching at three other institutions, I’ve never seen faculty share so publicly how students were progressing in classes or ask for help reaching out to those who are struggling or even share a recent successful paper or project. I immediately transform from a horrified 20-year-old student to a 40-year-old sociologist considering what this demonstrates about Marlboro’s values, culture, and academic structure.*

Even though I wasn’t aware of it at the time, as an undergraduate at Marlboro College, I was part of a larger web of people, a relationship-rich environment. Increasingly, scholars studying higher education argue that what “matters in college is who meets whom, and when” and that focusing on people rather than programs is a key factor in shaping student experience.<sup>1</sup> Using my dual-positioning as student-turned faculty at the same institution, in this chapter I explore the underlying dynamics of embarking on a self-directed course of study via close connections with faculty members. What does this model ask of the student in taking ownership and agency over their education? How does the faculty navigate shifting focus and supporting an individualized educational path?

This account allows the reader a deeper look into the experience of taking on the role of student and faculty, with particular attention to those moments of tension or friction when I wrestled with developing the new skills and habits needed to navigate this space. Focusing on moments of friction reveals the underlying values, principles and practices shaping this innovative educational environment. While previous

<sup>1</sup>See Chambliss and Takacs’ longitudinal study of the private, elite Hamilton College in New York state and Felton and Lambert’s range of college cases to show the value of a “relationship-rich environment”.

literature has demonstrated the importance of relationship-rich learning (e.g., Chambliss & Takacs, 2014) and transformative learning, it has not fully explored the way that these transformations occur. This chapter argues that experimental schools that help guide students through these moments of friction, allow for personal transformation and learning that would be difficult without such equal balancing of personal challenge and relational support.

This chapter closely analyzes the dynamics of student-centered learning at Marlboro College—a small liberal arts college in southern Vermont that operated from 1946 to 2020 where education was facilitated by close faculty mentorship and a student-driven curriculum. Founded early in the wave of progressive schools that emerged after World War II, Marlboro College was built on principles of self-governance and student autonomy over their education. Its earliest cohorts were composed of returning soldiers on the GI Bill who helped transform farm land and buildings into a campus.

Marlboro's core program involved students studying broadly for the first two years and passing a 'clear writing' requirement, after which they embarked on a two-year 'Plan of Concentration' which included focused study via advanced coursework supported by tutorials with professors and culminating in a series of projects evaluated by a faculty committee and an expert outside evaluator. In this program, Marlboro asked students to take ownership over their learning. The centering of individual students permeated the college's practices, including key rituals like Commencement, at which every student introduced themselves to the community, and Graduation, with every student's area of study, faculty sponsors and the title of their project read aloud for the audience.

Some of the key distinctive and innovative aspects of the Marlboro program included not only a centering of student learning through intensive individualized coursework, but also an overall shift in the set of social relationships on the campus. Instead of traditional hierarchical forms, connections were more horizontal: Faculty were viewed as co-learners following alongside the student's path. They were also community members who participated in ritualized activities such as shared meals in the campus' sole dining hall (a converted barn), and a Vermont-style "town meeting" where every member of the community—student, faculty, staff—had an equal vote in determining campus affairs. For example, community leadership positions like Head Selectperson or committee oversight roles

could be held by students, giving them insight into institutional issues like housing, campus safety and events funding.

The horizontal, informal, and occasionally blurred roles track back to the early roots of the college. Oral history accounts of early Marlboro students—cohorts during the years 1946-1960, dubbed the ‘Pioneer Years’—describe faculty-student interactions. Notably, not only do they mention classes and pedagogy, but also comment on student/faculty interactions that extended outside the classroom as they saw faculty assume a variety of roles. Take, for instance, courses being taught by the college president. Walter Hendricks “would be teaching Chaucer’s ‘The Miller’s Tale,’ and he’d throw up the window as a cement mixer went by, yell at the driver, tell him where he was delivering cement, close the window again and carry on with class” (Early Voices Project interview with Hugh Mulligan ’48).

We know from social science literature that adjusting to college is a challenge for students and that not all are equipped with the necessary resources—from social connections, economic capital and cultural know-how—to successfully adapt and benefit from this space. Quantitative and qualitative studies have shown how less-privileged students (based on statuses such as first-generation, immigrant, and/or race) face different hurdles in persisting through college, accessing support, and building network connections (Rondini et al., 2018; Stuber, 2011). The National Education Longitudinal Study compared first-generation students to their peers and found they declared majors later, were more likely to withdraw or repeat courses, and were associated with longer degree completion times and higher rates of attrition (Rondini et al., 2018, 2016). Other studies show that first-generation students and students of color reported fewer faculty connections or mentors (Jack & Irwin, 2018).

However, most of the social science research draws from experiences at selective, elite, or otherwise traditional colleges. What does it look like in an innovative space that centers students and gives them agency and ownership over their education and builds in access to faculty mentors? Should we expect to see the same struggles as in traditional schools? Where might there be different tensions, new challenges, and areas for growth for the students?

To answer these questions, I use my own experience as a lens to understand the student agency and ownership in education. I utilize autoethnography to connect the personal to the larger dynamics, literature on

low-income first-generation students (like I was) to articulate why friction points emerge, and concepts of webs of connection and constellation of mentors to demonstrate how an innovative educational environment can lead to opportunity and growth for students.

My undergraduate experience helps illustrate how these pedagogical settings can ask more of students, given the expectations that they chart their own curricular path with the confidence and clarity and that they interact with faculty as collaborators rather than authority figures. In this way, schools such as Marlboro offer friction points for students that both challenge and support growth by building on skills that they bring into college. My account highlights how this college setting provided the necessary integration into an academic culture and larger relational web that overcame incomplete information and skills in navigating college life and mismatch in approaches to working with faculty and setting academic goals.

#### AUTOETHNOGRAPHY: STORIES OF THE SELF AS STUDENT AND PROFESSOR

I was a student at Marlboro College, graduating with a Plan of Concentration in Sociology and Economics in 2001. After completing my Ph.D. at Brandeis University, I returned to Marlboro to teach sociology in 2016. My return to Marlboro was, in some ways, a continuation of my undergraduate experience. This was mirrored even in the physical space I occupied. I was assigned to the office of the previous Sociology professor. The exact office I sat in as a student, posing naïve questions, fumbling through my notes, and charting my thesis is now my professional home. As a student worker, I even cleaned this office. Now, it's lined with my books, which I lend out to my students to help in their work. I've quite literally been on both sides of the same table. I've been in the Long Room during faculty meetings. That's also the place where, during an undergrad course, I was taken aside and told to "speak up more in class." But despite returning to the same institution, the same room, many things had changed: I had trained to be a professional academic and the school itself made adaptations to the changing needs of students.

What can we learn from one person's account of navigating the student/faculty roles and relationships? What my account of Marlboro can contribute is an examination of the complex dynamics at the heart of the student/faculty relationship in an innovative educational space from both

sides, a lens few have experienced. I mine these experiences for crucial friction points where the roles and relationships stirred up some degree of discord, contemplation, or awareness of contradictions.

In this piece, I address these questions via autoethnography where personal experience is the primary data and the goal is “not about focusing on self alone, but about searching for understanding of others (culture/society) through self” (Chang, 2008, p. 48).<sup>2</sup> Reed-Danahay describes this method as “a form of self-narrative that places self within a social context” (1997, p. 2), thus a key way to draw on the sociological imagination of placing ones’ biography in the context of larger structural and historical changes.<sup>3</sup>

The goal and benefit of such an approach comes from the insight into the interactional dilemmas and decision-making moments in an educational trajectory.<sup>4</sup> This perspective can be most revealing in autoethnographic accounts when one is a “boundary-crosser” where the “role can be characterized by that of a dual-identity” (Reed-Danahay, 1997). Reed-Danahay further clarifies that, at its core, autoethnography discards a binary view of identity or role and replaces it with “one stressing multiple, shifting identities” (Ibid.).

In doing this work, I relied on memories, notes collected from years as a student and teacher, speeches, personal diaries, faculty meeting notes, and various college material.<sup>5</sup> Of course, those were still filtered through the memory of my lived experience with the notes providing richer details

<sup>2</sup> For a good review of approaches and critiques see the following: Reed-Danahay’s 1997 edited volume. *Auto/ethnography: Rewriting the Self and the Social*; work by Anderson (2006) and Ellis and Bochner (2006) on the differences between evocative and analytic autoethnography.

<sup>3</sup> It can be particularly effective in teasing out complexities, such as Vidal-Ortiz’s (2004) exploration of being a “white person of color”, to show the complexity of both native and outside, oppressor and oppressed aspects of Puerto Rican racialization and Wall’s analysis of international adoption.

<sup>4</sup> See Roberts’ (2018) autoethnographic account as a first-generation college student.

<sup>5</sup> I still have all my undergraduate notebooks, thesis documents and even Plan applications. As a faculty member, I have numerous journal entries, notes, and a set of reflections specific to my educational trajectory that I produced as part of a course I was teaching. This allowed me deeper insight into what I was thinking and feeling at different moments in this larger narrative.

for the recollections.<sup>6</sup> I then put my dual-positioned experience in conversation with what we know from the social science literature on how first-generation students experience college and how faculty interactions can shape learning.<sup>7</sup> A core theme that arose from my memos and notes was that of being “uncomfortable” when taking on new roles that demanded skills, habits, and ways of being that didn’t come naturally or felt at odds with other parts of myself. As a student, Marlboro College asked me to build confidence in an academic setting that felt foreign to me and then, as a professor, despite returning to the same campus, the student-centered pedagogy made new demands of me in my role as professor. I was challenged to share more of myself in the mentoring dynamic than was immediately comfortable and to find my place in a larger web of connections.

### STUDENT VIEW: TAKING OWNERSHIP OVER EDUCATION

*The drive from Vermont to my home in Connecticut, and especially following the long, winding Route 9 down the hill from the Marlboro campus, is a liminal period for me.*

*I sometimes chat and argue with my dad about what I am learning. He dismisses it—“they are teaching you communism” or “what a waste”—but he at least lets me talk and tries to engage, all while blowing a constant stream of cigarette smoke out of the blue-green Ford Explorer whose rattle gets louder as my college years go on. By the time we reach home a couple of hours later, the conversations about college have been reduced to “so it’s going OK ... well, then, OK.”*

*No one in my family seems to know what I am doing, don’t quite understand what it means to have a major, especially in sociology. Needless to say, doing a ‘plan’ is beyond any further exploration. Transitioning from campus to home means shifting into a different, but not necessarily uncomfortable, way of being. I become louder, laughing, joking, trying to cut down others with the one-up-manship of a teasing joke. I leave behind the knowledgeable remark or challenge to a logical fault that I am honing on campus.*

<sup>6</sup>I join Wall (2008) here on the ways memory is often unjustly attacked in social science research as invalid: “It seems that unless data about personal experience are collected and somehow transformed by another researcher, they fail to qualify as legitimate ... if a researcher had interviewed me about my experiences as an adoptive mother and had recorded and transcribed it, it would have legitimacy as data even though both the interview transcript and my autoethnographic text would be based on the same set of memories” (2008, p. 45).

<sup>7</sup>Importantly, this account highlights frictions from my class status, but notes there were continuities with my age and race status as I entered as a white student of traditional college-age.

*There is an ongoing discomfort in trying to unite these two different parts of me, just as much as there is in trying to suppress one aspect while in the opposite space. I'm not sure that ever got easier.*

As an undergraduate, I didn't have the names to label this lived experience. Now, as a sociologist, I would refer to myself as what Rondini (2016) calls an LIFG: a low-income first-generation college student. Sociologists use terms like this to capture students who are generally traditionally college-aged, with parents who did not achieve a baccalaureate degree. The class background is often captured through various metrics, including family income being in lower quintiles and parents in working-class jobs.

My father and mother worked with their hands in different ways: my mother on night shifts turning over beds in a convalescent home and my father fixing industrial kitchen and heating appliances. He also briefly held a job driving a big rig, which likely influenced my earliest career aspirations: for the longest time I dreamt of becoming a truck driver and it wasn't until late middle school and early high school that my father tried to dissuade me by explaining it was a stressful gig and I would get hemorrhoids. I hadn't planned much beyond that and floated through high school doing well academically and being completely unsure what this meant for a career. During the single, 15-minute meeting that was both the first and only time I met with my high school guidance counselor, they suggested I attend University of Connecticut despite my expressed interest in a smaller school. My decision to pursue and attend Marlboro involved both incomplete information and unclear aspirations, but was driven by some understanding of the need to enmesh myself in a community interested in my intellectual growth that I doubted I'd find amongst the 25,000-plus students at UConn.

In many ways, my lowered or incomplete aspirations matched what other literature has found on low-income or first-generation students entering the foreign space of higher education, including a potential mismatch or "ambition paradox" in which a student's information and expectations for college may not align with their decisions. These mismatches come in a number of forms, including deciding on a four-year bachelor's degree but choosing a program or pathway to a career that requires additional social networking skills or capital to be successful. Close studies of student experiences, such as Armstrong and Hamilton's analysis of 48 women on one dormitory floor, showed how non-elite students have spotty and incomplete information on how to navigate curricular



pathways and find themselves choosing paths that undermined their success, such as majoring in courses that would not lead to a desired career or getting pulled into a “party pathway” when they did not have time and resources to balance social and study life (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Goldrick-Rab, 2006). Other themes present in my recollections highlight what scholars have noted about contradictions or mismatches that can occur when students from less privileged backgrounds enter higher education, including disconnection, cleavages between home and school, and the lack not only of financial resources, but also social capital and cultural know-how on how to successfully navigate this space (Aries & Seider, 2005; Jack, 2014; Stuber, 2011).

Disconnection between the worlds of home and school is a common theme in studies on less-privileged students adapting to college. One study interviewing non-elite women at a selective college reported that, over time, respondents find that their “conversational repertoires have shifted such that they have difficulty communicating with the friends and family members they left behind at home. For example, [one student] recalls with exasperation how difficult it is to talk with her mother over breaks: ‘It’s not just avoiding conversations or talking to [my mom], it’s feeling in a totally different place. We wouldn’t even talk about the same things, much less try and talk about them in the same way’” (Lee & Kramer, 2018, p. 90). As in these findings, my experience mirrored what other students experienced when shifting from college to home, with new habits unintelligible to friends and family and moral judgments about these changes, including charges of becoming a snob or sellout, and leaving roots behind.<sup>8</sup> In contrast, Jack and Irwin (2018) found that middle class students “typically hit the ground running when they arrive” and found continuity between their pre-college family and school experiences and thus were able to navigate relationships with their new professors, and seek college resources as needed.

Without defined curricular pathways and course requirements, and with a largely open curriculum, Marlboro College stood in contrast to many colleges that have been studied in the literature. Rather than directing students through pre-defined courses progressions or even having simple pre-requisite requirements, progression at Marlboro was marked by moments of passage: a Clear Writing Requirement, a Preliminary Plan

<sup>8</sup> See also Granfield’s *Faking it Until Making it* for how this dynamic play out for law students.

Application, and the completion of individualized projects, culminating in an oral-exam presentation involving an outside examiner. The time spent and choices made between those moments of passage—how to mix disciplines, what courses to take, and how to establish one-on-one tutorials with faculty—were left for the student to determine, with support from their faculty and academic advisors. The principles at play were articulated in a set of rubrics developed during my time as a faculty member. These rubrics stated that the Marlboro program required students to “undertake and manage self-directed, complex, and sustained projects.” Additional learning goals—“seek feedback, evaluate and revise work” and “engage in meaningful collaboration”—signaled that collaboration with faculty was central to students’ academic careers.<sup>9</sup>

In reflecting on these learning goals alongside my experience as a student, a few friction points emerge related to these principles of student ownership: managing a large project, engaging in effective collaboration, and seeking feedback and support:

*During my pre-college campus tour, when the Plan program is explained to me, I immediately say I don’t think I can do that (probably not a smart thing to say when seeking admission to college, but add that to the pile of things I don’t know yet).*

*Still, after a few years at Marlboro, I am embedded in the momentum and flow of campus life. I show up to my weekly tutorials. I am surrounded by students all going on the same path at different levels of confidence, bluster, and flailing. In coming to my undergraduate thesis topic, I feel urgency to have a clear, distinct idea, but am also overwhelmed and lack the confidence that I can state one and follow through with it. I cling to a general question: what does work mean for people? I’m not yet equipped to delve deeper and certainly feel ill-equipped to wade into Marxist arguments. My project comes together bit by bit, and I decide to conduct field research on whatever white-collar temp job I get over the summer. This decision is both practical, to pay for my tuition, and to feed into my writing.*

*I move forward by sheer momentum and necessity. If there were any other option than continuing, honestly, I might take it. I talk and talk and talk and, eventually, am forced to hand in something. Not every meeting with faculty feels useful. Weeks go by when I don’t read what I am supposed to or I do, but feel as though my notes add up to nothing. I enjoy respites where my professors*

<sup>9</sup>The remaining learning goals include: communicate clearly in writing, analyze, and synthesize ideas and conduct research or create original work which more clearly match those at traditional colleges.

*don't push me or allow me to maintain face in the embarrassing moments when they ask a question, I flip through my yellow notepad and find I have nothing to say. Luckily, we can always say "that is something for next time." Our shared understanding, built atop an underlying momentum, is that we will keep meeting, that something will be produced and the 'what' could change but the fact of my finishing will not. That is perhaps the small sliver keeping my confidence going when things otherwise feel impossible.*

By design, Marlboro didn't really give me any choice but to continue on. As scholars have argued, students don't make academic choices from a full set of possibilities. Many possibilities are cut off by virtue of strict curricular requirements, scheduling, and access to information about programs (Chambliss & Takacs, 2014; Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013). But Marlboro did very little in the way of limiting curricular choice. It provided virtually limitless curricular choices. Instead, it required intensive work in close development with a faculty member so that possibilities were enabled and constrained by the ability to find a faculty mentor. This is in stark contrast with schools where individualized programs or intensive thesis work is reserved only for a select group of students pursuing honors or capstone projects.

Marlboro offered the choice to exit college, of course. Many students took this option: less than half of my freshman cohort remained by graduation, often leaving before the third year when intensive study began in earnest. At the time, I wasn't aware of the lower rates of persistence among first-generation students. Marlboro's student-focused, flexible curriculum meant that every student would be facilitated toward their goal. The expectation was built into all aspects of the experience and that generated its own momentum. This mirrors what other, more-focused academic intensive programs have found: the norming of challenging work can help students resiliently push through challenges to complete their academic career.<sup>10</sup>

Additionally, a key part of the innovation in Marlboro's approach was that the learning and curriculum was tied to people, not programs. When students identified areas of study they wanted to pursue, they also had to identify a faculty to sponsor the work. As a student, I could not simply study sociology with a focus on gender and labor. I had to say that I was

<sup>10</sup>See work on the Science Posse Program at Brandeis University as analyzed in Rondini et al. (2018).

working in these areas with Jerry Levy and Jim Tober (and convince them to work with me). I had to meet with those professors, share my ideas, get feedback and guidance, and then apply it to my work. Twenty years later as a faculty member, the process was digitized and filled out through online portals, but essentially it was still the same. A student at the end of sophomore year submits a preliminary Plan application with a basic description of a course of study and the name of the faculty who supports the work. The description and eventual specifics of the project deliverables were fleshed out over time, but no Plan project could move forward without a faculty sponsor. This was but one of the many inescapable moments of connection created by the Marlboro model.

In her study of Hampshire College in this volume, Wenk finds that those weekly meetings with faculty became a support system that developed skills beyond academics, such as resilience and self-confidence. Similarly, and to meet multiple goals—achieving course credit, moving towards graduation, Marlboro provided me numerous opportunities to build close relationships. Advanced classes were either just myself and the professor or occasionally 2–3 students. Individualized advanced coursework was supported through seminars where feedback first largely came from faculty, shifting increasingly to peers over time. In particular, close attention to my work and weekly check-ins helped me feel more confident in moving from asking basic questions (what books I should read? Where I should conduct a study?) to bringing new theoretical frameworks to tutorials and creating a plan to study clerical workers.

Similar to Wenk's findings, I was supported by a dependable web of people who encouraged self-reflection and growth, with feedback and encouragement coming from a mix of formal and informal structures. When I returned to Marlboro as a faculty, some of these informal practices—self-reflection that might happen in a tutorial meeting or over lunch—had been formalized into structures like sophomore portfolios containing the previous two years' work as they proposed plans for their final two years.

Forcing these moments of connection, this seeking out and engaging in deep relationships, also required that students feel comfortable addressing faculty on a face-to-face level and eventually in a collaborative, almost peer, manner. The friction points here are both similar to and different from what the literature identifies: for non-elite or first-generation students, this may be their first time encountering a dynamic in which the teacher is not in complete control as an authority figure who must be

followed. This can pose challenges, as LIFG students may not understand the interactional norms and subtle rules operating here. Numerous studies have shown that LIFG students, for instance, don't understand and thus don't utilize office hours.<sup>11</sup> Rather than being viewed as a valuable opportunity to benefit from direct engagement with faculty, these studies show LIFG students view it as a place to go only if they're in trouble, similar to being brought to the principal's office. Lareau's 2003 *Unequal Childhoods* tracked socialization differences across classes to show that lower-income families teach their children in the elementary school years to be largely deferential to teachers and take directives, while middle- and upper-class students are socialized to feel more entitled in addressing and seeking support from authority figures. In keeping with these findings, at the beginning of my college career, I never sought out my professors outside of class and worked (often against my own interest) to stay off their radar or take up their time.

Jack and Irwin (2018) extend Lareau's findings into the realm of college experience to show that less-privileged students at an elite university were less likely than their middle-class counterparts to proactively seek help from their professors and other support services. One of the students drew clear boundaries between her peers and faculty saying that "I feel like no one needs to know about my private life. Alright, if I have a personal relationship with you and we see eye to eye and we are on an even playing field ... I feel that way with my peers ... When you deal with faculty and administrators, I'm down here and you're up here. I feel like they don't keep their distance, their professional distance" (Jack & Irwin, 2018, p. 145).<sup>12</sup> I entered Marlboro with a similar set of beliefs and cultural dispositions. It was only through repeated, close, one-on-one interactions with faculty in a variety of settings (classrooms, town meetings, the dining hall) that I learned the benefits of and strategies for engaging with faculty in a new way. This occurred most frequently in the small, everyday moments built into the pedagogy and community. Close-knit seminar classes flowed into end-of-semester celebrations at the faculty homes

<sup>11</sup> See for example Jack's 2018 work *The Privileged Poor* and his work with Irwin (2018).

<sup>12</sup> Notably, Jack and Irwin also compared less-privileged students who had experience in an academic preparatory program with those who did not and came direct from public high school. They found that it wasn't just familial resources that dictated whether or not students would proactively cultivated relationships with faculty. Those from the low-income but academic preparatory category were more likely to utilize those strategies and engage with college and faculty resources having already learned the benefits and techniques to do so.

where my professor would prepare pasta while I set the table and joked with classmates. Annual work days had me clearing debris off trails alongside professors who I had yet to take classes with but who demonstrated the value of working together and seeing each other as individuals and peers not bound to prescribed faculty/student roles.

While not uncommon, focusing too much on friction points based on deficit or cultural mismatch can underrecognize useful assets that LIFG students bring to their collegiate experiences. For example, studies show that first-generation students or students from backgrounds not traditionally served by higher ed—for example, immigrants or students of color—do important social translation work for their families and thus often take on the burden of navigating their, and their family's, way through the college process (Rondini et al., 2018; Stuber, 2011).

As mentioned earlier, the physical geography of Marlboro served as a boundary at which I switched between versions of myself. The ride on Route 9 and Interstate 91 was the only opportunity to discuss anything about college with my father. By the time we had returned home to Connecticut, we had stopped talking about what I was doing at school. At college, picking classes, finding time for schoolwork on breaks throughout the school year, and deciding my major all happened without family input or guidance. Prior to college, filling out financial aid forms was my responsibility. I only even managed to take the SAT because a friend mentioned they were taking it in a week or two and I tagged along.

As a first-generation student, I didn't enter college prepared to proactively cultivate faculty relationships and discover and leverage available resources. However, I was able to take control over my educational trajectory once connected to mentors and the larger community, as I was used to navigating this space independently from family supports. More specifically, I was part of a larger interactional web than I realized at the time: connections with faculty, staff, students, combined with dependable, ongoing meetings firmly embedded me in the community and in academics. This web is similar to Wenk's identification of mentoring constellations that include both assigned and naturally developing mentors. My work study position in the admissions office built up strong ties that led to continuing into summer employment but advice on how to navigate professional work office environments.

Reflecting on the precarity and friction points of my undergraduate career makes clear the value of an approach that centers students and focuses on building skills rather than assuming they are already present.

## FACULTY: SHIFTING OWNERSHIP AND DEVELOPING RELATIONSHIPS

*Being a faculty member can, at times, be all-consuming. I feel as though I'm always working, always thinking about my students and their academic needs. I keep finding notes on my phone and iPad about things to do: remember to tell my tutorial students about this: recommend this book about protest rhetoric; here is a good diagramming of an introductory paragraph; email a colleague about recent work on this topic ... and on and on.*

*So, I'm particularly surprised when, during a tutorial, a student abruptly confronts me, saying "I don't really know you."*

Though it seems like there should be a linear continuity in my experience—from Marlboro student to faculty member, now working in the same office where I used to meet with my Plan sponsor—there are discontinuities and friction points as I adapted to a new role in a familiar institutional environment. I am now multiple, and somewhat conflicting, selves: the professional who was socialized in graduate school to represent a discipline and the working-class student who still feels uncertain about these intimate personal connections in the more horizontal hierarchy, what one student in Jack and Irwin's research called 'too touchy-feely' (Dews & Laws, 1995; Muzzati & Samarco, 2006; Ryan & Sackrey, 1984).

It is not simple to return to Marlboro as a former student. I had undergone over 10 years of socialization into becoming a "professional sociologist," involving advanced graduate training, attending professional meetings, and teaching in three colleges and universities (one liberal arts college and two private research universities). The shift from a near decade of intense investment into a discipline and body of knowledge moving up a status hierarchy to perform as an "expert" now shifts to a meeting between two people where the student is likely to lead me into areas well outside my specialization. In my case, being deeply familiar and experienced with Marlboro did not always ease moments of friction and tension that can confront faculty working in innovative, student-centered programs.

I was surprised by the difficulty and discomfort I faced as I began my faculty role. Early in my first year, I spent many late nights trying to not only prepare for the courses I was teaching, but also read everything each advanced student was reading for their tutorials. More-experienced colleagues seemed to shrug off my panicked attempts to keep up, conveying

more and less explicitly that I didn't need to read everything the students read. In conveying this idea, they were pointing towards a key difference in the student-centered model which my graduate training in more-traditional institutions hadn't prepared me for. I did not need to perform as an "all-knowing sage" in a hierarchical power relationship. I had to learn to become a guide, someone who kept up good 'handrails' as one professor said, but did not control every step of the process. Weimer describes a learner-centered classroom where "power is redistributed in amounts proportional to students' abilities to handle it" (2013, p. 94). But for those trained in other approaches, redistributing power brings challenges.

*When the student says "I feel like I don't know you" during our tutorial, it breaks the flow of the work and conversation. We are reviewing the student's recent readings on immigration and family identity. This is an advanced student: I've had them in many classes and they requested that I work with them on their two-year Plan.*

*They say they know so little of my life. I ask if they feel it is necessary or helpful for them to know more. They reply, comparing me with other faculty who they feel they know very well, who share more of themselves. The student says I am more of an enigma and that that can be intimidating or off-putting. They do feel I am helpful in their work and studies but they want more from me.*

*As I understand better what the student means, I interrogate what makes me feel uncomfortable about that statement. I share when I feel it is 'sociologically relevant': a story to round out a text; sharing my siblings' different career trajectories; what my schooling was like; my partner's promotion in a corporate bureaucracy. Things I feel aren't relevant are kept private: family life; what I do in my free time; my thoughts on politics. I hold some of myself outside the classroom, outside my relationships with students. I am used to a holding-back dynamic in a college context. As an undergrad, I was part of two different worlds. People in my home life wouldn't understand what I was learning at college and while on campus I learned to tone down aspects of my working-class background to better fit in.*

*I hear in the student's plea the complex relational dynamics built into Marlboro's model: it is not an equal relationship even when many things shift in that direction. I won't become their friend, but I will become something like a peer who supports them in an intellectual journey. I offer support, but do not want it in return. Our relationship is not always reciprocal.*

Programs based on student-centered learning involve shifting the power and control over aspects of the educational experience, such as



syllabus design, aspects of assessment, whose voice has space in the classroom, but the change is deeper and comprehensive (Weimer, 2013). In a more flat or informal hierarchy in which the faculty is expected to engage with the whole student and learn alongside them, it is not enough to show up as a representative expert of the disciplinary field. This model frequently asks the faculty to take on a new position of mutual engagement: learning together, willing to be taught by the student, to learn from student experiences, and to have ours be transformed in turn.<sup>13</sup>

Despite having experienced this mutual engagement as a student, as a faculty I more commonly showed up as my “professional sociologist” self rather than a fuller version, something the student picked up and interrogated. It’s not surprising that this student wanted to know more about me, given how much of themselves they were sharing during the learning process. This desire for reciprocity is echoed by bell hooks: “Professors who expect students to share confessional narratives but who are themselves unwilling to share are exercising power in a manner that could be coercive. In my classrooms, I do not expect students to take any risks that I would not take, to share in any way that I would not share. When professors bring narratives of their experiences into classroom discussions it eliminates the possibility that we can function as all-knowing, silent interrogators” (hooks, 1994, p. 21).

The oral histories of Marlboro’s early years show that this deeper, more-open model for student/faculty engagement was embedded early in the school’s culture. Students frequently reported having dinner at professor’s houses and noted that faculty felt accessible and connected to their lives, using language such as “becoming friends” and noting how they stayed connected post college life. These dynamics were described in an interview with Bruce and Barbara Cole ’59:

Barbara: Yes. I just felt that you could of course talk to them at any time, and they were right there for you a lot, as friends as well as—I shouldn’t call them peers ... but in a sense they were the same. I mean, we were, John MacArthur isn’t much older than we are, actually, well, ten years maybe...

<sup>13</sup>As noted by Wenk in chapter “Empowering Students Through Evaluation: Over 50 Years Without Grades at Hampshire College” in this volume, a key feature of innovative college programs involves changing the dynamics of faculty-student relationships. In Hampshire College’s case, narrative-based evaluation was one means to generate student ownership over learning and reduce adversarial roles.

- Bruce: Always accessible. I mean, they were always available for you, there was...
- Barbara: Yeah. You could go to their house, or call them. First-name basis, of course, and they were exciting to study with, because they were learning things as well...

While higher education literature increasingly converges on the importance of personal connections with students reporting satisfaction when faculty see them as full people, it often has less to say about the faculty experience. Occasionally, scholarship will address the time investment required by these models, especially in pedagogies that require professors to act in ways that may be different than their professional training, though the exact dilemmas and adaptations this entails are less clear. Cases like Marlboro, where students are empowered to chart a path and seek out connections to people more than specific programs, can offer clarity on the tensions experienced in navigating a new role and set of relationships.

*Perhaps because I realize now how high-stakes my education was, how I could easily have fallen out of college entirely, as a faculty member I feel pressure when working with LIFG students. Ensuring that they graduate on time means they won't incur additional debt. I help them practice elevator pitches for their work and take them to professional conferences so they see the value of translating out what they're doing at this 'weird Marlboro place' to something that makes sense to the outside world. Knowing what's at stake for these students is why I signed on as the faculty sponsor for the internship program: I worried students wouldn't be able to translate a dense Plan project into work skills and experiences that would start them on a career. And while I am not solely accountable for any student's success or failure, the connection and responsibility can be highly intense. Students may take all of their courses for a semester, even two, with only one professor. If that professor goes on sabbatical, other faculty struggle to cover their work. When I picked up students from retiring professors, I could see the gaps in our work and felt that, compared to the faculty with whom they had a deeper connection, I could be only lightly useful.*

Centering the student increases the risks and burdens placed on each faculty member. In my time at Marlboro, I was generally the primary faculty member sponsoring five advanced students at a time. That number is on the lower end historically and signals the declining enrollment and tenuous financial position of Marlboro College in the latter years leading up to the merger. Faculty who had been at Marlboro longer often recalled

periods of high enrollment in which one faculty member might be supporting upwards of 15 students a year. This role requires one tutorial meeting per week plus additional support via feedback on papers and occasional advanced seminar meetings. This, in addition to a typical teaching load of 2–3 classes a semester, suddenly seems like an intense time and mental commitment as revealed in my earlier notes on feeling constantly dialed in to student needs. It was only after fuller exposure to the faculty side of Marlboro education did I understand the value and meaning of having mentorship and connection points shared across a larger web of people rather than relying on a few individuals. That centering the students means de-centering myself as a faculty responsible for the entirety of educational outcomes.

Returning to that faculty meeting which is distinguished by the ways it is different from all other faculty meetings I have attended, I'm struck by the emphasis on attending to individual student needs and, more importantly, that no one person was expected to be the sole mentor, advisor, or welcoming ear. While it felt odd for my shy undergraduate self to be publicly discussed in this way, it also showed a web of relations that aimed to catch those potentially falling through cracks or to note who might have a better point of connection with a student than the formally assigned advisor.<sup>14</sup> These discussions did not show up as a bullet-point on a set agenda for the meeting, but were open, flowing discussions as staff and faculty assessed student needs and located who could best meet them. As I paid closer attention, I saw this practice of network-building and maintenance at the student level as well.

*I am teaching a research methods class and we are using the recently published Chambliss and Takacs book as a jumping off point for our own class project researching how Marlboro students pick their Plan topics/focus. It is a small class and the research is designed to introduce and give exposure to different methodologies rather than produce systematic results. I am still struck, however, by patterns in the interviews conducted by students of the thoughtful strategies they use in seeking out faculty mentors and connections: avoiding those they feel are distant or overly tough or in whose classes they would struggle. They also take classes with professors they think can be helpful in charting their academic path even if the substantive topic is not a direct match. As a faculty advisor to plan projects, I also witness students thinking out loud their rationales for putting together a team to support their thesis projects: 'this faculty will keep me on task*

<sup>14</sup>For more, see Wenk's discussion of mentorship in chapter "The Role of Mentoring in Innovative Progressive Institutions" of this volume.

*and give me the accountability I need, this faculty does inspiring work connected to my interests, this one is very supportive but not as tough as I need'. I also know students come to me with specific needs not met by their other faculty sponsors and of course I expect the reverse to happen, with students seeking out other faculty when frustrated by my approach or limitations. The benefit is a web, composed of multiple, available people, with less likelihood that someone will say 'that's not my area or responsibility'.*

Marlboro adapted its program over time and key changes had emerged once I arrived as faculty. The precarious nature of linking to one faculty member and the possible variance in mentorship practices (casual check-ins at a meal compared to more-organized weekly meetings) was addressed through an official weekly “Ded Hour”—a play on the phrase “dedicated hour” for mentoring but also the college’s unofficial mascot: a dead tree. Additionally, in its latter years, Marlboro implemented a first-year seminar to guarantee that all students had transparent access to information on navigating the space while linking with additional staff resources and enhancing peer connections. These changes represented an increasing formalization of aspects of student-faculty relationships that had been operating informally since the college’s beginning. Drawing reflectively on my own student experience, I see value in making norms and strategies for navigating college transparent and explicit to all.

That web of relations provided benefits to both students and faculty because it allowed for supports and inputs from unexpected places, and access to unexpected resources. Students were able to receive mentorship from staff, not just faculty (Felten & Lambert, 2020). Happenstance connections between students and faculty who don’t work together or haven’t had class together did occur, such as when a presentation I was giving to my students on the IRB process ballooned in attendance thanks to word-of-mouth leading to my students’ friends sitting in.

Despite students wanting—and, per bell hooks, perhaps being entitled to—greater knowledge of and disclosure from their faculty, the community-centric nature of the Marlboro program created other opportunities for connection. Our “town meeting” governance model and a “work day” in which faculty, staff, and students joined together to perform manual-labor improvements to campus facilities allowed structured ways for students to see faculty as fuller people without self-confession or the creation of cults of personality.

The model has risks: as mentioned above, sabbaticals and retirements posed particular challenges to continuity. With only one faculty member per disciplinary area, a student not connecting with that faculty could mean that they don't work in that subject (see Chambliss). But, by centering student agency in discovering connections and establishing the web of relationships needed to succeed, risks are mitigated. If one connection doesn't work, another might.

### IMPACTS AND LEGACY

*More than five years after graduating from Marlboro, I begin preparing for graduate school. As always, I am a bit naïve about this process, how to navigate it, and how to develop appropriate aspirations. I don't quite realize how the GREs work. I borrow a library book, practice for a week, and take the test, with fingers crossed, totally unprepared for what would come. When visiting one school, graduate students chide me for not simply immediately choosing the top-rated school where I have been accepted. Moments like these unsettle me a bit as I question if this will merely be a repeat of my high school experience where I felt wholly unprepared. Things are different this time, however. Even though I've been teaching 3-4-year-olds in Head Start for the past few years, I'm now more confident in my ability to navigate new academic environments. I utilize information from a weak tie in my somewhat-sparse social network and feel assured when I select a graduate school with a reputation for being student-focused.*

*A few weeks into my graduate education, I meet on on-one with the theory professor who has a reputation for being intimidating (I agree, but also come to find her to be caring). Her desire to actually know each student reminds me of Marlboro, and she immediately asks if I am working class. She says she can tell and I think that shapes her desire to mentor me even more. What gave me away, I always wonder? I haven't even considered that I stand out in that way or that I am different from my peers.*

The continuities I experienced between Marlboro to grad school speak to the power of being educated in an intensive academic environment that focused on my individualized development.<sup>15</sup> I was the only one in my Ph.D. cohort without a master's degree, but I felt no difference in academic skills. I was more confident in my ability to take on the lengthy, involved dissertation project and, while still slightly jarring to me, I was

<sup>15</sup> Marlboro alum frequently attended graduate school in high numbers.

better equipped to navigate faculty relationships and seek sponsors for my work than many of my peers. That was a benefit conferred upon me by Marlboro's student-centered and -driven culture.

On the opposite side of the coin, I had difficulty navigating a more-traditional, hierarchical academic environment. I didn't have the practice or cultural know-how necessary for this arena. (What is the difference between full professors and associates? What even is a provost? How do you get funding and build a professional reputation and network?). Overall, the value of my undergraduate experience was highlighted by graduate school and further understanding how Marlboro has prepared me was a motivating factor in returning to teach there.

Jack and Irwin summarize the findings of many studies when they say, "Colleges must account for the cultural resources undergraduates bring with them to college" (2018, p. 149). This often follows a plea for elite and traditional schools to ensure that less-privileged students don't fall through the cracks and that they should provide additional mentoring, support, and skill development. The case of Marlboro shows how more-innovative programs can, through encouraging student ownership, tap into resources and improve outcomes from students who question their fit in college and may enter with incomplete information. It also highlights the need to consider what faculty bring to this exchange. Even with my lived experience of the Marlboro education as an undergraduate, when I became a faculty member, I still struggled with adapting to the horizontal relationships that asked for "more of myself to show up" for the student. Pushing myself to engage in a broader way—both in sharing more of myself and seeing myself as part of a larger web—led to growth as a faculty member.

I reflect on these friction points, and the growth that comes from them, as I sit in my new office in Boston. While holding the same official role as a teacher of sociology and working with Marlboro students, significant changes have occurred and the web of connections of which I am a part is much larger and has been transplanted.

### TRANSPLANTING THE DEAD TREE: MARLBORO MERGES AND MOVES TO EMERSON COLLEGE

*There is a new decal on the window of the Marlboro Institute for Liberal Arts on the fifth floor of the Walker building at Emerson College in Boston—a pleasant image of a tree with curved lines and leaves. The tree may be pleasant, but the*

*simple presence of leaves on the decal indicates a profound shift. Across my 20 years as a student and faculty member at Marlboro, the college's insignia and mascot being a dead tree was a constant, even though the college is too small to have formal sports teams (though it often had informal soccer teams, and later quidditch). Still, as students, we referred to ourselves as "the fighting dead trees."*

*Saying "we," in this case indicates my alignment with a collective identity that comes from boundary-making activity. The "we" of Marlboro is built by comparing ourselves to schools that are not like us, from sharing collective stories (remember when no other college would play soccer with us because we smoked cigarettes on the field?), and gatherings and activities that charge this identity.*

*I pause at the Institute door to fully take in the new logo only after missing the turn in the hallway and getting turned around, unsure where this office is located. It is pleasant, and welcoming image in this downtown, high-rise office, but nonetheless a change. I view the dead tree as an inside joke, the "anti-mascot" mascot. It reinforced that what we were doing was different from traditional schools. It marked clear boundaries and reaffirmed our values. I'm not confident that is being communicated by this new, vibrant image. I cross the threshold of the office and consider how new boundaries and identities are being made.*

This piece has teased out some of the complex dynamics resulting from increased student agency and collaboration via a curriculum and pedagogy centered on student learning. It also suggests the value of focusing on people, particularly in an environment full of people, instead of relying on just a few. The question that this leaves: how much of this innovative and quirky program can be transplanted and cultivated in a new context?

This is not a philosophical question for me and fellow Marlboro faculty. In 2020, the college formally closed its Vermont campus and merged into Emerson College in Boston. The faculty retained jobs at the newly created Marlboro Institute for Liberal Arts and a new interdisciplinary major was created to support individualized student work. A fuller analysis of this merger remains to be done, and it is too early to attempt even a provisional one here. It will take quite some time to see how Marlboro's dead tree takes root in its new urban environment.

Still, Marlboro is not the first college to experience this transition. Chapters in this volume from Warren (chapter "[When Innovative Institutions Fail: Quest University, Partnerships, Financial Sustainability](#)") and Cherry et al. (chapter "[Innovating as an Embedded Program at a Larger State University: New College in Three Pivotal Moments](#)") provide some provisional insights from other institutions. Echoes of displacing Marlboro's dead tree can be heard in Cherry et al.'s student who

describes the merger of New College into the University of Alabama system as “freshwater fish being thrown into the ocean” (chapter “[Innovating as an Embedded Program at a Larger State University: New College in Three Pivotal Moments](#)”).

In their analysis, New College is able to retain its experiential, interdisciplinary approach within the larger institutional context of University of Alabama, making New College a draw for prospective students with an interest in majors otherwise unavailable. Carving out this space, allowed New College to demonstrate its value to the larger university. This suggests a possible model from Marlboro’s function within Emerson.

A further avenue for considering the meaning and success of Marlboro’s closure and merger into Emerson comes from Warren’s chapter on the lessons drawn from the case of Quest University Canada. As Warren notes, “A good closure scenario is one that honors the work of the institution,” which includes attention to the mission, influence on higher education and the staff, faculty, students, and alumni central to executing that mission (Warren, 2023). The Marlboro Institute is positioned within Emerson in ways designed to honor its legacy of student-centered learning through newly created interdisciplinary major in the spirit of the Plan of Concentration.

That said, Warren also identifies the challenges inherent in folding innovative colleges into existing institutions: “A common trait of innovative universities is the tendency to innovate once, and then have a difficult time innovating again” (chapter “[When Innovative Institutions Fail: Quest University, Partnerships, Financial Sustainability](#)”). It will be interesting to observe the new iteration of Marlboro as the initial innovative impulse takes new forms. How will it create programming that speaks to a student body focused on arts and communication? How will new majors address student desires for broad learning and professional experience?

One element complicating any analysis of the Marlboro/Emerson project is that the merger took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, making it difficult to assess the cause of any difficulties. The merger does, however, pose powerful questions: Can a solid core of people shaped by a specific context retain those values and practices when they move to a much larger institution? Can they diffuse the principles of student agency and ownership, backed by horizontal relationships, to people who didn’t experience that program in its “natural” habitat? Can such an innovative program only flourish as a slightly separate environment within the larger institution or can the program’s principles and practices diffuse out and influence parts of the college not directly connected to it? How can students and faculty from the more-traditional parts of the institutions take on new roles involving close mentoring and student agency?



This is the work of social interaction and culture, to keep Marlboro's practices and philosophy alive and meaningful. Transplanting Marlboro to Emerson is complex: it moves a deep history of shared place, culture, and practice. From thick woods to a city block, from a small liberal arts college to an institution with over 20 times more students, from a single dining hall as a nexus for chance encounters to meetings that must always be scheduled in advance. Marlboro is now a small lily pad in a large pond. But the nature metaphors may need to stop. Emerson is one block in a large neighborhood. We have to find ways to keep our block parties, regular interactions, inside jokes and longstanding knowledge alive in a place where, when you move two streets away, the city becomes unfamiliar. The question I ponder is: Who can do this work? Is it the faculty who moved to Emerson who will keep this past alive? What about the students who transferred (with some even gaining leadership positions in Emerson student government)?

Social theory applied to the context of higher education offers some guidance. Chambliss and Takacs key in on the core factors that can enable community and connection: boundaries (such as those defined by the dead tree anti-mascot), physical co-presence, focused attention, and ritualized activity and boundaries.<sup>16</sup> The pandemic has reduced the availability and benefits of co-presence for most schools across the country, Emerson included. Focused attention is gaining ground, as Marlboro community members are aligned to a sequence of 'spine' seminar courses that all Marlboro interdisciplinary students take over their four years and which are taught by a rotating set of former Marlboro faculty. Ritualized activities are beginning to take root, including trips back to the Vermont campus, informal gatherings for picnics and outings, and the continuation of a pre-college "Bridges" program that brings first years together with peer mentors for outdoor adventure. Those who have brought Marlboro with us to Emerson seem hopeful that growing this seedling of culture and community can sustain core aspects of the transplanted program.

Certainly, Emerson offers things Marlboro never could, such as a larger range of courses, experts, and resources for charting their academic career and life beyond college. I now point students towards courses and colleagues in new exciting majors such as Health and Social Change or Media Psychology during our discussions on crafting their interdisciplinary and

<sup>16</sup>These factors are drawn from theoretical work going back to the earliest roots of Durkheim and then refined in contemporary writing by Randal Collins.

individualized majors. This larger web not only means more diversity in connections but also means less fragility in relying on any one person as a central node for mentoring or expertise. The more formalized seminar series also means more transparency and guidance in charting this pathway, a feature that can benefit students who come to college with incomplete information or academic navigational skills.

Still, I miss the very meetings that made me nervous when I started as a professor. I still meet with students individually for their capstone projects, although sometimes biweekly rather than weekly. I get updates about their progress but largely through email and checking online advising portals. At Marlboro, I would also see them in other classrooms, sitting out on the lawn, during town meeting and I'd hearing about their progress from other faculty. I find new challenges and friction points as the lessons learned on the Marlboro campus are ever more heightened as I work to find balance in maintaining close student mentoring while further de-centering my role in a larger, more diffuse web of support.

## CONCLUSION

Marlboro's evolution from small, independent institution to a small program within a larger college, as well as my own journey through both, demonstrates the ways in which experimental approaches to higher education challenge the status quo and give opportunities to non-traditional students, but also sometimes struggle to achieve long-term viability and financial stability.

Larger institutions interested in centering the student can take note of my argument that even at a small institution like Marlboro, any one faculty member was de-centered in service of building up a dense, supportive, multi-person web of connection. The connective web does not need to occur over lunch or campus workdays while chopping wood, of course. It may take on a different character as larger institutions bring in a range of professional services and multiple people and programs. In fact, the size and variety of larger can mitigate risks noted in the Marlboro case created by small numbers of people upholding the connections. For these larger institutions, a key question to answer will be: How is this web of support be made visible, transparent, and accessible when the web is more diffuse and it can be less assumed in the institutional culture that everyone will be brought into the web?

More horizontal relations between a faculty and student (such as that of being a co-learner) requires a willingness by faculty to share more of themselves as a way to model the excitement and process of learning new material. As Wenk's chapter on narrative evaluation argues, scaling up an innovative approach may not work if it is imported wholesale. Rather, it may succeed when institutions identify components that are translatable and can transform the education they already offer. Wenk's case of Hampshire highlighted the value of metacognition and an active, reflective process for students. Similarly, this chapter emphasizes the importance of shifts in educator-student roles and the ways that student growth incorporates embracing risks and friction points via mentorship.

Institutions seeking to add these innovative approaches need to ask questions about on how to facilitate transparency and dialogue around what it means for students and faculty to assume these new roles. Programs may need to support students in taking on a new level of control and ownership over their educational paths, while faculty may need to shift from their expertise-focused professional socialization into modeling how to be an excited learner of new material. Further useful reading on the evolving role of the faculty comes in Harris' focus on two main ways schools may train and hire faculty and how that creates a learning environment responsive to the changing social world while maintaining stability in mentorship and well-mapped curricular pathways.

By delving deeper into these dynamics, I hope to have touched on aspects relevant to schools considering implementing student-centered learning and what work it might require from both students and faculty. Connecting my dual-positioned experience with literature on relationships, student persistence, and faculty presence demonstrates the impact and value of having multiple touchpoints and being embedded in a larger web of purpose and connection.

While I am no longer part of the web of connection that was Marlboro College, located on a hill in the small town of Marlboro, VT, I am now part of a newer, larger set of relations centered at the corner of Boylston and Tremont Streets in downtown Boston. In this new context, faced with new challenges, I bring a piece of Marlboro with me. In the disorienting mix of new bureaucratic structures, new teaching modalities during a pandemic, and finding my way as a new faculty member, I find clarity in centering the student. I ask the same questions but find new pathways to answer them: Who can support this student's interest? How can I

encourage them to take ownership over their project and ideas? What curricular path will they chart for themselves? The very questions so difficult for me as an undergraduate are now the most animating as I continue my work as faculty.

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# After Eden: The Civic and Social Potential of Innovative Higher Education

*Patricia Karlin-Neumann and Eli Kramer* 

## INTRODUCTION

Johnston brings together every best practice that matters in higher education: small class sizes, relevant learning, contact with professors, collaborative relationships with colleagues, deepenings on community and what it means to be a citizen of the world, and intellectual inquiry... The amazing experience and learning is not unique to Johnston, it's just a lot easier to have once you arrive. (Interview 32.12.22.15)

In 1969, Johnston College, a fledgling innovative experiment in American higher education, was dubbed a “New Eden” by *Time Magazine*'s Higher Education reporter. For it was a place where students could “create their own courses, without grades or formal classes, and the key scene is the

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group-encounter session that joins teachers and students in working out their hang-ups together” (Colleges-The New Eden, 1969). The experiment was invigorated by a living-learning ethos in which democratic governance—with students as full partners with faculty—guided the whole community. Johnston sought to create an environment in which the qualities of a holistic and integrated learning experience—interdisciplinary teaching and learning, student-centered education, egalitarianism, experiential learning, and an institutional focus on teaching rather than research or publication (see Kliewer, 1999, p. xviii)—would be practiced. Infused with the countercultural energy of the 1960s, the entire college took to heart the (apparently only) directive of its benefactor, James Graham Johnston: “I dinna care what you’re doin’, as long as you’re havin’ a good time” (McDonald & O’Neill, 1998, p. xi).

A half century later, Johnston College is now the Johnston Center for Integrative Studies of the University of Redlands. While it is no longer “new,” its Edenic ideals live on in a program that has shaped its home university and helped it navigate the current higher education terrain. Johnston continues to embody many of the hallmarks of innovative or progressive higher education: learning beyond narrow credentialing, a recognition of the need for personal development, and a cultivation of authentic relationships between teachers and students (e.g., Kramer & Fried, 2021).

Yet, given the crises we face today, some may regard such an education as an indulgence of a by-gone era where funding and resources for higher education were flush, and we were not fighting to secure democracy’s future against tyranny and autocracy, as well as attempting to save ourselves from ecological collapse. Further, now that many historically innovative institutions of higher learning are coming under attack for being bastions of liberalism, the situation only seems more precarious. One also wonders, as many colleges and universities have at least partially adopted some of these practices, whether these innovations remain unique in the higher education landscape. We therefore must ask whether such “educational Edens” can or should survive in these times. Do they contribute something critical to education and culture, or are they the relics of an outdated vision, a “paradise lost,” no longer relevant to our perilous times?

In short, amidst our multiple contemporary crises, from the threats of climate change to the rise of anti-democratic populist parties, what role might historically innovative institutions of higher learning play in

preparing students to be dynamic community members and educated and engaged citizens for our times?

By studying students after they leave their “educational Edens,” we have learned that programs of individualized-integrative education coupled with strong living-learning communities can empower their alumni to be agents of change for themselves and their communities. While Johnston’s playful, artistic, and therapeutic model of education is personalized and leads to self-understanding and individual growth, this does not preclude it from nurturing thoughtful leaders in a broad range of community, civic, or social justice settings. In fact, by helping those students practice their commitments in a smaller experimental space, Johnston can cultivate and empower leaders who know how to make collaborative and sustainable change in their communities.

From our research, we believe that the practices incubated in innovative colleges can be incorporated throughout the broader landscape of higher education. The six characteristics identified in the 2014 Gallup Purdue Index Report of graduates who shape successful futures are pervasive in such institutions:

- Taking a course with a professor who makes learning exciting.
- Working with professors who care about students personally.
- Finding a mentor who encourages students to pursue personal goals.
- Working on a project across several semesters.
- Participating in an internship that applies classroom learning.
- Being active in extracurricular activities. (Great jobs great lives, [2014](#)).

While such practices can be found on many campuses, they are fundamental, intentional, and celebrated at Johnston and similar schools. Psychologist William Damon studies how young people find purpose—how they discover that which is both meaningful to the self and of consequence to the world beyond the self (Damon, [2008](#), p. 33). The eloquent voices of alumni in our study affirm that Johnston’s unique blend of self-directed learning and self-authorship, responsibility for community, authentic relationships with mentors, negotiation and an emphasis on teaching, enrich not only their education, but also lead to the discovery of their lifelong sense of purpose. Their experiences can inform and inspire educators in all types of colleges and universities.



In this chapter we treat Johnston, our alma mater, as a case study, exploring whether and how this Edenic (or in our own term *eutopian*)<sup>1</sup> education has shaped the civic and social practices of alumni for whom those practices are vital.

We surveyed alumni from each decade since Johnston opened in 1969, and identified and interviewed alumni who have been catalyzed by their Johnston experience to engage in subsequent civic, social justice, and community organizing activities.

Our study relies on three data points. We conducted nearly 50 interviews with alumni, obtained their graduation contracts (narrative documents which described their educational journey) and solicited recent reflections on their graduation contracts. Through our interviews and their reflections, we discovered that deep engagement in the Johnston community prepared them to be civic actors for social change in a variety of contexts. Sometimes this commitment to participate in or organize democratic communities across differences was implicit and ameliorative; other times, it was bold and revolutionary. While Johnston undergraduate experiences are quite diverse—certainly there are students who struggle in the program or do not plumb its depths—for the subset of alumni we studied, their education greatly shaped the way they have created, engaged in, and supported their various communities following graduation.

In the next section we briefly discuss what we mean by Johnston being a *eutopia* (albeit one quite different from those campuses that identify as having explicit civic and social justice commitments as part of their founding vision). We then provide some further background on Johnston, ourselves, and this project. Next, we turn to the interviews with Johnston alumni, staff, and faculty since 2009 to examine how the educational experience shaped their engagement with community, civic, and social justice work. We conclude by reflecting on the service and lessons *eutopian* institutions can provide for the broader landscape of higher education.

## EUTOPIAS

*Time Magazine* missed the opportunity to ask “why” the “New Eden” was created. For Johnston—like its forebears in American innovative higher education such as Black Mountain College, Deep Springs College, and University of Wisconsin’s Experimental College—enacted the ideals

<sup>1</sup> A neologism we will explain in the next section.

of a better way of living and learning on a small scale, to show their significance in practice, and to model their value to others. These schools served as incubators to inspire learners to understand themselves as capable change makers who together can envision and bring into being a better world. The promise of how we can live, learn, recognize, and care for others became a reality on a small scale and, in doing so, challenged the status quo.

Historically innovative communities of higher learning like Johnston transformed Sir Thomas More's pun in ancient Greek, where an *eu/topos* (good-place) is *v/u-topos* (no-place). Instead of offering creative pieces of fiction to broaden our moral-imaginative vistas, as Plato and More had done, they created actual communities attempting to practice full visions of the good life. Unlike "utopia" (taken literally) they are "somewhere." They shaped a *eutopian* politics, which "aims at refining human political life through actualizing the 'good life' in a smaller place. It does so to proffer a powerful expansion in the broader culture of the recognition of the dignity of others" (Kramer, 2021, p. 303).

Some *eutopias* are centered around religious and social activism, such as Berea College, which began as a fully integrated interracial and coeducational school in the slaveholding South before the Civil War (Kramer, 2015, pp. 86–107). But some, like Black Mountain College, sought to promote a commitment to individual creative aesthetic projects, far from direct political activism. Yet they too sought to embody values that recognized students and faculty as full persons with deep potential and to model a community that could be a "good place." Also, like Black Mountain College, infamous for its chaotic organization, fights in leadership, deep interpersonal conflicts, precarious finances, and hostility toward the experiment (Duberman, 2009), these communities often struggle to bring those ideals to fruition and sustain them. The process to become a mature *eutopia* is difficult and necessitates continual reflection on whether the community members are truly living their values, if and how to deepen, enrich, or alter them for the current moment, and if and how to atone for failures and set a better future course. It can be a delicate and destabilizing enterprise. While those involved might be far from perfect, and the misadventures at these places may be glaringly obvious, so are their successes and legacy. To be a *eutopia* is not to be perfect, but rather to demonstrate that the multivalent, ongoing aspiration to elevate each other and deepen connections in a quest for growth can work in practice.

As we shall argue, we regard Johnston as a kind of *eutopia*—one characterized by playful, hard-won individual growth in a supportive community, which seeks to recognize and model the dignity of many kinds of learners, empowering them to negotiate their education and indeed, their lives, with others. This community engagement practices democracy as a way of life in the tradition of John Dewey, who famously said,

A democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience. The extension in space of the number of individuals who participate in an interest so that each has to refer his own action to that of others, and to consider the action of others to give point and direction to his own, is equivalent to the breaking down of those barriers of class, race, and national territory which kept men from perceiving the full import of their activity. (Dewey, 2008a, p. 93)

Johnston, especially through its consensus decision-making processes that views individual difference as essential to reach common ends, manifests Dewey’s understanding of democracy. However, for this all to become clearer we need to learn more about Johnston and hear from its alumni, administrators, and faculty.

### JOHNSTON IN CONTEXT

Johnston has combined time-honored, even conservative, educational values with egalitarian pioneering practices. A founding faculty member opined that Johnston’s educational purposes, like many liberal arts institutions, has roots in Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle: “know yourselves,” “develop useful vocations within your societies,” and to be “academics with both breadth and concentration in at least one discipline.” But akin to those purposes, he added, Johnston enculturates a special gift for serendipity and *chutzpah* (E. Williams, personal communication, April 8, 2010), fulfilling Jimmy Johnston’s mandate, “as long as you’re havin’ a good time.” Not only the vision, but also the pioneering quintessential qualities of a Johnston education have fundamentally remained the same throughout its history: democratic self-governance, student motivation and agency, a living-learning community, negotiation, a consensus process, and enduring relationships between students and faculty.

Johnston is distinctive in inviting each student to shape a personalized path and curriculum. Students create their education by negotiating

individualized contracts both for specific courses and for their entire educational journey. For each course, students design a contract conveying the responsibilities they intend to take on for that class. In order to graduate, they present a graduation contract, a narrative of their experience, tying together their past coursework coupled with classes they intend to take in the second half of their undergraduate experience. Ultimately, in their final year, they meet with a committee of students and professors to demonstrate what they have done. There is self-evaluation at every stage of the process. Each student constructs their own educational path and narrates the story of that path.

A focus on the individual is so characteristic of the school that, initially, when Johnston College became a center of the University of Redlands, it was briefly called the “Johnston Center for Individualized Learning.” But as distinct and individualistic as each student’s experience may be, one of the hallmarks of Johnston is that those experiences come to fruition and are celebrated in community.

A 2002 graduate who served as an admissions officer for Johnston described to prospective students this balance between personalized learning and communal responsibility by thumbing through a course catalog from a traditional school. “If you go to a school [with a] major that’s already been negotiated without you, ‘here it is. You follow.’ Then I would hold up a blank piece of paper [and] say, ‘[Here, at Johnston], there’s nothing to follow.’” (Interview 50.1.13.15). But along with that metaphor for student agency and self-authorship, he would assure them that a Johnston education cannot be experienced in isolation:

The contract process involves dialogue with your advisor, your friends, with the actual contract committee. And that’s an essential lesson for the world at a lot of levels, from [the] pragmatic to relationships to networking. Those are the two biggest things. That it’s not in a vacuum and it’s not something you follow... I think that’s the DNA of what the Johnston education involves. The blank piece of paper that you have to fill, but not alone. (Interview 50.1.13.15)

In their book, *The Perpetual Dream: Reform and Experiment in the American College*, Gerald Grant and David Riesman took note of both the communal and the individual qualities inherent in a Johnston education. Analyzing the experimental undergraduate education movement in the

1960s and exploring its roots in the earlier reforms of the 1920s and 1930s, Grant and Riesman coin the term “telic reform” to describe American institutions of higher education shaped by a forward-looking orientation that can empower students to practice the values they want to see in the world (Grant & Riesman, 1978, pp. 15–17).

The authors distinguished among four types of “telic reform” carried out in the early to middle twentieth century: *Neo-Classical*, *Aesthetic-Expressive*, *Communal-Expressive*, and *Activist-Radical*. Grant and Riesman considered Johnston to be a model of “*Communal-Expressive*” telic reform, characterizing it as the college “that perhaps went furthest in grounding itself in [T-group<sup>2</sup> or encounter group] techniques.” Noting the pervasive T-Groups and psychological orientation in its inception, they see evidence of a religious or mystical quality—“the desire to experience unity and to find mutual growth in the support of a group, through openness to others” (Grant & Riesman, 1978, pp. 25–28). Even after the T-groups that defined the early years of Johnston waned, interest in transpersonal psychology, a commitment to the living-learning community, and relationships between students and mentors remain central to the Johnston experience.

That religious or mystical quality, the commitment to community, and enduring relationships with faculty binds many alumni to the institution long after receiving their degrees. This is certainly true in our case, which we turn to next.

## AUTHORS IN CONTEXT

The two of us were students in two different eras and incarnations—Patricia graduated from Johnston College in 1976 and Eli from the Johnston Center for Integrative Studies in 2012—yet we experienced the same passion and pedagogy in our education and recognize not only how it set us on our life journeys, but also how that education continues to animate us.

**[The following section was written by Patricia Karlin-Neumann]**

As a first-generation college student and the only one of my siblings to have studied past high school, I owe a rich and fulfilling life to my mentors

<sup>2</sup>T-groups or training groups, sometimes called sensitivity training groups are groups where participants learn about themselves through their interactions with one another during the group meetings.

at Johnston. Knowing well my passions and commitments and trusting the promise they saw in me, professors at Johnston suggested that I become a rabbi. At the time, only one woman had been ordained, and I didn't yet know about her. So, armed with a healthy dose of *chutzpah*, a conviction about the centrality of belonging to a community where every voice is valued borne of my Johnston experience, and a narrative transcript with a concentration in "Nonviolent Social Change," I applied to rabbinic school and embarked upon a career as a university chaplain, hoping to provide for other students the care, loyalty, and mentoring that I was the grateful beneficiary of at Johnston.

The seeds for this project—examining the relationship between a Johnston education and engagement in communal and civic life—were planted at a reunion celebrating the 40th anniversary of the founding of Johnston. After multiple conversations with fellow alumni who were ardent about making the world a better place in their personal and professional lives, I wondered whether Johnston played a role in leading so many alumni, like me, to be engaged in community, civic life, and social justice.

To be sure, there are many Johnston graduates for whom the connection between individual and community has led in directions other than explicit civic or social justice work. Most of the founding and current faculty would agree with Grant and Riesman's characterization of Johnston as an example of the *Communal-Expressive* rather than as an *Activist-Radical* telic reform like Antioch College.

Yet, those reunion conversations prompted the question: Was there something within Johnston's educational model, in the paradoxical blend of *expressive* individualized learning married with a *communal* commitment to democratic governance and community participation, that laid the groundwork for a commitment to civic or social justice work?

Knowing little history and philosophy of experimental or innovative education beyond my own experience, I proposed to facilitate a seminar at Johnston to explore with students the literature and history of experimenting colleges and universities in America, for which the Consortium for Innovative Environments in Learning (CIEL) generously provided a grant.

Co-author, Eli Kramer, now an associate professor of philosophy, was an undergraduate in that 2010 seminar, "Outdated or Underrated: Exploring Experimenting Colleges and Universities in America." We studied the historical precedents, legacies, and contemporary experiences of innovative, progressive schools and hosted two community-wide

experiences. The first, with L. Jackson Newell, President Emeritus of Deep Springs College and one of the foremost researchers and teachers of what we call *eutopian* higher education, was a far-ranging discussion of the promise and problems of, in his parlance, “maverick” colleges. The second, the highlight of the semester, was a Founder’s Night—a luminous evening where current students met those who conceived and birthed Johnston, and those founders got to see how their dreams have taken root in the newest generation of Johnstonians. Several of our own luminaries, now, sadly no longer with us, were present, regaling us with stories of the birth pangs of Johnston College.

**[The following section was written by Eli Kramer]**

That course was pivotal in shaping my life path. After graduating from high school feeling burned out from my K-12 experiences, I knew I wanted something different. I was lucky to have chosen Johnston to be my home. It was the first place where my independent streak and desire for supported self-development in a rich intellectual environment was fully nourished. However, it was only in the class with Patricia that a calling emerged for me. I was amazed to learn that there was such a rich history to whole person humane education, including the pedagogy and curricular structures that in Johnston I had come to love, such as the living-learning community, interdisciplinary curriculum, democratic governance, and qualitative assessment. And yet, I was shocked that most of higher education seemed ignorant that these practices were not simply insights from the last couple of decades, and was dismayed at the trite way it seemed many campuses tried to put them into practice. I was also inspired that some brilliant luminaries and ideas were fostered or at least contributed to these schools, from Coretta Scott King and Clifford Geertz at Antioch to Josef Albers and John Cage at Black Mountain College, from the work-campus/free tuition model at Berea to the experiential learning models at Prescott. These places seemed like refuges in the wilderness to me that more people ought to have known and cared about. Since then, I have become a scholar and teacher of the history and philosophy of higher education, with a specialty in these *eutopian* communities of higher learning. I have created unique interdisciplinary research projects doing site visits and interviews of folks at many kinds of innovative institutions of humane learning and have been lucky enough to teach at some of them.

As a result of the “Outdated or Underrated” seminar at Johnston, we became partners in this project. Reflecting on our shared experiences in innovative learning, and recognizing how many classmates and alumni of different eras were engaged in improving their communities, we began to ask questions such as:

- How do alumni at Johnston understand the relationship between their education and civic engagement or social change? How have they brought their education into the world?
- Is there a throughline between Johnston’s *Communal/Expressive* telic pedagogy and social justice?
- How might experimental pedagogy be reproduced and scaled for conventional institutions of higher education?

From our own history we knew that Johnston could be transformative and catalyze a career of action and engagement to make meaningful change in the world. It is to other alumni who found civic engagement or social justice to be salient in their own lives that we have turned in trying to understand the association between their education and their commitments.

## OUR STUDY IN CONTEXT

Our study benefits from examining three points of data over time—graduation contracts written by students when they were undergraduates, interviews with alumni over the past decade, and their subsequent reflections on those contracts. Our research is supplemented by a compendium of contemporary alumni and faculty essays, *Snapshot/50: The Johnston Community 1969–2019* (Brody et al., 2019), published to honor the 50th year of Johnston’s history.<sup>3</sup>

We also conducted a survey of Johnston alumni. Of the 119 survey respondents, roughly 76% attended in the second half of Johnston’s history. About 60% attended Johnston for their entire undergraduate years

<sup>3</sup> *Snapshot/50: The Johnston Community 1969–2019* (2019) is the third of three volumes about Johnston, following “*As long as you’re havin’ a good time*”: *A History of Johnston College 1969–1979* by founding faculty, William McDonald and Kevin O’Neill (1998) and *Hard Travelin’ and Still Havin’ a Good Time: Innovative Living and Learning in the Johnston Center 1979–2004*, edited by Bill McDonald and Kathy Ogren (2004).



and graduated from Johnston. While the reasons students chose the school varied, this sentiment was frequently expressed:

I felt empowered and challenged by an educational program that allowed—well, required—my ownership. As I was attempting to claim the same agency in other aspects of my life at the time (coming out of an experiential-learning senior year in [a] Denver high school), I was intrigued by the opportunity to do the same with my upcoming college education. Also, while I was a high-performer academically (and was valedictorian of my class), I wasn't motivated by grades, so a program that didn't have them was very attractive. (Survey Respondent 98)

Around 86% of those surveyed described “student ownership of learning” as an “essential” part of their Johnston journey. Further, 71% of respondents said the “living-learning community” aspect of their education was “essential.” Johnston seems to cultivate strong individuals while creating a robust community life. Our research suggests that autonomous critical thinkers and strong community life are not mutually exclusive. Although it may seem paradoxical, even to students during their Johnston experience, our findings suggest that they mutually reinforce each other.

### ALUMNI INTERVIEWS: THE JOHNSTON EXPERIENCE

While Johnston was briefly referred to as a “Center for Individualized Learning,” for more than two decades it has been more accurately known as the Johnston Center for Integrative Studies. For it is the integration of academic and community, of personal and intellectual exploration that has emerged repeatedly in alumni recollections.

A 2006 alumna prefaced her graduation contract with these thoughts,

In true Johnstonian and living-learning fashion, I cannot separate the academic from the personal. In explaining what I study and why, it is apparent to me that my schoolwork is full of my life and what matters most to me. A paper I write, a project I present, a single paragraph I read over and over, a discussion I have in class or a professor's office; these events are always personal because they are independent yet intertwined explorations of *what* I see, do, and think about every day, and ways of understanding—the constant shifts in focus and blurring of lenses—that both reflect and alter *how* I see, do and think. This is what makes me ask questions. (Graduation Contract Reflection 27.7.28.14)

While these sentiments may resonate with undergraduates on traditional campuses, it is rare that they are proclaimed, respected, and preserved in the academic record.

At Johnston, students have historically paired with faculty to share the teaching. Faculty mentors are accessible, their office doors in the student residences open for connection. Educator James Boobar, '02 who co-taught with several different professors as a Johnston student, appreciated the value of “gaining individual ‘authorship’ of learning, enjoying a dialogic relationship with faculty, and engaging with community” (As cited in Ogren, 2019, p. 58). Just as beneficial as students find co-teaching, professors prize engaging in authentic learning with young scholars, expanding their own content knowledge, and practicing interdisciplinarity. In this way, students and teachers create moments of learning that recognize each other as whole developing persons, worthy of a nurturing environment for self- and communal transformation.

Johnston’s flexible system of contracts, a structure providing for mutual responsibility within the classroom, inculcates democratic learning. Founding faculty member and former director, Yasuyuki Owada, in his own self-reflective anthropology of Johnston, noted,

The students as learners were to *initiate* action toward the faculty who, as facilitators, would *respond* to the students. This was the feature that defined the contract system of learning as a social vehicle of the Johnston symbols and that presented the system as being diametrically opposed to the traditional, post-figurative mode of education. (Owada, 1981, p 133)

In the contract-based curriculum, empowering student learners to be dialogue partners with faculty within and beyond the classroom is an essential building block of the community, lending *eutopian* contrast to the too often disempowering broader higher education system.

The process of evaluation, too, instills authority and mutual responsibility. Based on their course contracts, students appraise their own commitment and learning as well as that of the instructor. Taking their evaluations into consideration when writing narrative student evaluations, the instructor attends to the personal and communal goals which students enumerated in the class contracts. Students are thus active shapers, rather than merely consumers, of the learning environment.

Similarly, in order to graduate, each student writes and presents to a committee of students and faculty a graduation contract describing the

trajectory and story of their educational vision, and the courses they propose or have taken to fulfill it. This living document serves as a blueprint for the remainder of the student's Johnston experience.

The student returns to a Graduation Review Committee in their last year—practically, to oversee the completion of the Graduation Contract, but ritually, to celebrate and endorse the educational journey the student has undertaken at Johnston.

Johnston students' concentrations or emphases rarely sound like standard majors. Those written by some of the alumni we interviewed range from, "Art Therapy and Buddhism: Contemplative Practice through the Visual and Poetic Arts" to "History, Social Change and the Radical Tradition;" from "The Poetics and Pedagogy of Sexuality" to "Diplomacy." But whatever the emphasis, the culture at Johnston provides opportunities and models to develop students' unique angles of vision and creativity, as well as to practice democracy in both community meetings and the classroom, to negotiate and to work collaboratively, to take initiative, and to assume a commitment to life-long learning.

As 2003 alumna Cole Cohen has commented,

Over the past fifty years and into the future, Johnston students and alums maintain certain characteristics that have led us to believe that we should take charge of our own education. We are single-minded, unquenchably curious, and helplessly quirky... We wouldn't let anyone else tell us how to think, so we left behind homes and families to join an educational commune. (Cohen, 2019, pp. 101–102)

Each of the last words in that description is equally resonant. The personally tailored education so highly valued by this and other students is balanced by—and sometimes in tension with—a fierce commitment to participating in a democratic living-learning community whose norms and constraints are argued, determined, and enforced, together. Self-governance (i.e., Deweyan democracy as a way of life)—by tradition, through consensus—requires attention to the needs of others. It provides profound lessons in civic responsibility, negotiating, not only academics, but life together. It is in community that the Johnston belief—that intellectual growth is intertwined with emotional and spiritual growth—is most powerfully instilled.

## ALUMNI INTERVIEWS: THE LEGACY OF JOHNSTON

Upon rereading his 1974 graduation contract, a clergy leader who pioneered a thoughtful structure for helping individuals develop religious depth and strengthen community asserted, “It was audacity that produced me: the audacity of the experiment not to focus on verification in the strictest sense. It was the audacity of professors who connected both personally and intellectually with their students and signed on to the growth of the complete person, myself included” (Graduation Contract Reflection 31.1.16.15).

Jan Hoffman, a 1973 graduate—one of the earliest Johnston students, who became a celebrated criminal defense attorney, proudly calls herself, “one of the bad girls.” She recalled,

We had such academic freedom, and the responsibility for our education was on each of us as individuals. It ultimately developed my confidence to not be afraid of academic challenges—or any other challenges for that matter... We also had to be willing to fail. Iconic figures like Steve Jobs are willing to take risks, and a Johnston education sets up someone for that. (As cited in Gallardo, 2020)

After reading her graduation contract from 1977, an award-winning professor of education wrote,

Throughout my career, particularly as a teacher educator, I have had one mantra: we don’t teach subjects like math or history or English or Art; we teach kids. My students have repeated that statement to me for decades: “Here is the best thing I learned from you—we don’t teach subjects; we teach kids.” I was stunned when I read the words from my 20-year-old self in the grad contract: *“I believe that each student in a classroom should be able to expect to walk away with at least some self-knowledge and/or some self-acceptance. This faith assumes that teaching is not only Math or English or History; it is people. If that can be remembered, the struggle to be a good teacher is already won.”*

She mused, “I had absolutely no idea how deeply the roots of the core philosophy of my teaching actually went” (Graduation Contract Reflection 22.1.13.15).

A 2006 graduate, an arts activist who at the time of her interview was living with three other Johnston graduates explains that, nearly a decade after graduation,

We very much function as an intentional community and a family of sorts.... We all do different things professionally.... There are points of intersection and a commonality, not just in terms of personal or political values that Johnston supported... but also the perpetuation of engaged critical thinking... we push each other to not be lazy about the world around us and our responsibility. (Interview 27.7.28.14)

The quasi-religious *Communal-Expressive* embrace of the living-learning community provides fertile soil for democratic and civic engagement, service, and social justice for many Johnston alumni. While the school was not founded upon civic commitments like some *eutopian* colleges, the commitments of maverick colleges like Johnston to “democratic self-governance, personal responsibility and the study of the liberal arts and sciences” (Newell, 2015, p. xiv), seems to have fostered in some alumni who were deeply engaged in the program, communal awareness, and implicit civic responsibility. It instills a pervasive and long-lasting sense of what can be done together in the present to live one’s values and to envision a better world.

A 1978 graduate, an entrepreneur who became an award-winning climate activist explains that one of the enduring lessons of his undergraduate experience is that Johnston “personalizes justice.”

One of the things that I think is so powerful with Johnston was that it was small and personal, and because of that, all of these issues become very real, because you see them one way or another, affecting the people you live with, or are in a family with, essentially. I mean, I don’t know how you would come out of there and be selfish... But I just think that that kind of intensity of contact and experience lasts for a long time. Not only is it addictive, but it can’t help but make you take the condition of the world personally.... I’m an entrepreneur by nature, and I think Johnston creates entrepreneurs.... I came away with a feeling that the things I see being wrong, it’s up to me to do something about that. I can’t do everything at once, but I have to take it on. I mean the small business owners I met who got those awards, every single one of us said, “Okay, I’ve got to do something about climate change. Oh look! I have a resource. I have a business and that means I can. I have a certain kind of influence. I’m going to use it. Now, I have an opportunity to

tell others about it to help them use it too”. And that kind of thing is sort of an entrepreneurial approach to making the world better. I can’t imagine going to any of the other colleges I applied to and coming out with anything like that feeling. (Interview 56.9.9.22)

A 1997 graduate who joined the Marine Corps and now works in law enforcement draws a throughline from his engagement with the Johnston community to his commitment to public service. “Virtually every Johnston student will take the shirt off their back to protect or to defend or to come to the aid of another... student when truly necessary. It’s almost ingrained in you as a Johnston student from... that first day, that when we need to come together as a community, we will do that. We’ll sound the trumpet, and we’ll have that 10 PM community meeting and we’ll be there until hours in the morning. That’s the sole purpose of the Marine Corps, but I saw that so many times in Johnston” (Interview 24.7.30.15).

The education professor retired from her position, but not from pursuing educational equity. Upon reflecting on her graduation contract, she comments,

As I explored the roots of my passion for fighting for justice and voice for high school students in the rural, suburban, and inner-city high schools at which I taught, and for students, staff, and faculty at my university, I realized that Johnston was the place where those early seeds were nurtured and bloomed.

Further,

When I retired, I truly believed that it was time to hang up my sword and allow my horse to graze in the pasture. I’m beginning to see that when I am confronted with injustice, I have to polish the sword and whistle for the horse once again. I feel that in tracing the arc of my involvement in giving voice, speaking out, supporting, and taking action over the course of my career, Johnston is the central link, the place where I learned that sitting back and being quiet is unacceptable. One doesn’t just talk about injustice; one acts. For me, that’s the Johnston legacy. (Graduation Contract Reflection 22.1.13.15)

For a 1978 graduate, an Irish Catholic physician who worked in Indian country, started a global health organization, treated Ebola patients in Sierra Leone, and oversaw public health in the Department of Defense,

refusing to accept the world as it is has permeated her education and medical practice. As one of a few women in medical school in the 1970s, she reflected,

I didn't feel like anybody at my medical school was like me. Maybe a very few people. We... started a [program for underserved people] in my medical school class. I think I was able to do that because of Johnston... I knew how to organize; I knew how to talk to people. I knew how to move things along.

This initiative was clear from the start of her medical education. "My first year of medical school, we didn't have any nutrition so what do I do? I start a nutrition class, right? Why wouldn't I do that? I'm coming from Johnston. Wednesdays at noon... I have a... series of ten lectures."

As she soon experienced, challenging the status quo can meet stiff resistance:

I get called into the dean... "What are you doing? You're not allowed to do that. We don't teach nutrition for a reason." I said, "Well, what would that reason be? We all need to learn nutrition and people are coming who want to learn about nutrition." Oh, my goodness, you would have thought I was from outer space.... I didn't want to control the curriculum, I just wanted to learn nutrition. (Interview 33.7.31.15)

As in this case, Johnston alumni often are prepared to meet such situations head on with strong negotiation skills and a well-honed sense of humor. Asked about the roots of her commitment to public service, she said, "I am committed to equity and social justice. I don't know if that came from Johnston but what I know is that Johnston let me believe that it was okay to feel that way and to have that be a North Star for me. I have had many, many experiences in medicine that left to their own institutional devices, would have tried to tear that out of me" (Interview 33.7.31.15).

### ALUMNI INTERVIEWS: NEGOTIATING IN THE WORKPLACE

Negotiation skills refined through Johnston's academic practice of course and graduation contracts have been a touchstone for several of our interviewees. A founding faculty member, known for his intellectually challenging classes nevertheless values the practical education students receive:

It's a very entrepreneurial place, it's a very "real world" place. Students are constantly having to negotiate their way through situations in which their gift of gab and their thoughtfulness matter. So, they're selling programs to committee or to another faculty member, making their case, always making their case. And that's very "real world". They get written evaluations. Nobody in the real world gets grades; that's an artificial system confined to schools. But you've had plenty of narrative evaluations written about you. That's what the real world is. I play that up. I play up what people really learn here. They get prepared for graduate school; they get prepared for the world. (Interview 5.11.9.09)

Indeed, a former Johnston admissions counselor once quipped that one of the selling points of Johnston is that graduates find ways to get jobs they are not (yet) qualified for! A 2005 alumna explained that negotiation enabled her to do just that:

I have to say the permission to negotiate anything, and the permission to say, "I'll write a resume and submit it and do an interview and nail this job because I can figure out what you need from me." Right? The flexibility that Johnston inspires in, I hope most people in the program, allows you to step out into the world with the notion, probably the little bizarre, privileged notion, that nothing is off-limits. That is the only thing that I look back on the decisions I made immediately right after graduating... that decision of, "I can do this, I can figure this out. I can negotiate this" was the absolute key in building a future. Full stop. (Interview 34.7.12.14)

Not surprisingly, an entrepreneurial place generates entrepreneurs. The 1978 graduate who is a business owner and climate activist discussed how he intentionally brings the egalitarian spirit and personalized orientation of Johnston to his company:

Being a business owner creates a hierarchy immediately. You're the person who signs the paychecks. So that's a tough role to create community with. I tried to create as "Johnstony" a business as I could figure out to do. I told the staff I don't want there to be a division between work and life. I made sure every day to demonstrate to people that they can disagree with me and it's cool, as long as we hang in there and stick it out. I think that's one of the most important things about Johnston. That and the entrepreneurial spirit. My education never stopped. (Interview 56.9.9.22)



As a recognized leader in his field, he describes facilitating a small business roundtable of Climate Leadership Awardees in which they affirmed the values that motivated them:

I asked them, “Why did you do it? Why did you embark on an environmental mission?” And every person there told a story that was personal, about not wanting to impact the health of their family, their kids, or they see what’s changing in the world, and how awful it is, and how unjust it is, and they just can’t abide it. And so, they’re going to invest in using their business as a tool to do something about it. Every single one. But not one person said, “I see an economic advantage in doing this.” Not one of them. They all did it for intrinsic reasons. I turned to the audience, and I said, “Is this what you expect to hear from business owners?” And they said, “Oh, God, no! I never heard such a thing!” Right, but it’s the truth in the small business world. (Interview 56.9.9.22)

Having spoken very personally about his own motivations at a meeting convened by this alumnus, the microphone went around the room for people to share their stories. Eventually, a disabled Gulf War veteran rose to speak. He had been down and out and had been inspired by the salvaging and recycling of people living on the street. He started a recycling business based on that model. In telling his story at the roundtable, he commented, “I can’t tell you how amazing it is to be in a business meeting where I can talk about what I really care about.”

Our alumnus continued,

That, I think, is exactly Johnstonian... People have desires and goals, and they’re communitarian, and they’re familial and it isn’t about me, me, me. By and large we need to make our world more Johnston. I think Johnston gives you courage, wherever you are, to make that move. (Interview 56.9.9.22)

### ALUMNI INTERVIEWS: EMPOWERING THOSE COMMITTED TO SOCIAL JUSTICE

For three classmates and former housemates in the same city, who graduated from 2002 to 2004, each intending to become creative writers and instead became community organizers, Johnston’s role in fostering social engagement was nuanced:

The three of us, creative writers, changing the world—by not writing!... I think that there's a certain quality or character, that is, for the person that gets drawn to it, and I think through the living-learning environment... you become politicized into thinking about things communally. I think that is the launching point for many folks into a broader social justice framework.... Johnston is kind of like a petri dish. We kind of [were] playing around with social change on a very, very, very microscopic level and I look back at that and I think, man, all that time I was trying to improve that tiny, little, mostly white, wealthy community. (Interview 25.8.4.14)

He continued,

[The Academic Director invited me to teach]... graphic design to the Boys and Girls Club in the community, which was predominantly low income people... of color, and I had this kind of aha moment. "Wow!... there's a bigger world out there." I think that Johnston does a good job of bringing in the right people and then giving them the right framework to move on to do that work. (Interview 25.8.4.14)

Another of that trio echoed Grant and Riesman's *Communal-Expressive* telos, when she said, "I think there will always be personal transformation and personal growth. Hands down, yes. Even if you took nothing out of Johnston, you come out of Johnston knowing yourself in some kind of way that you didn't going in."

She went on:

I don't think we put anything in our structure to guarantee [a social justice awakening] but there's so many things in our structure that guarantee you will know yourself personally and individually better.... folks who are looking for [a social justice orientation] or have the potential for that, or come into that framework... it will rocket you out, but... for someone who wasn't looking for that at all, [I don't think] that it really guarantees you will find it. (Interview 36.8.4.14)

Nina Fernando, a 2011 alumna who works in the faith-based community to build bridges across differences did find her calling at Johnston. She shared how the practices of Johnston and the process of self-knowledge contributed to her commitment to social justice.

At the end of every course, we write self-evaluations, course evaluations, and we receive narrative evaluations instead of grades. And so, in that process we're constantly paying attention to our strengths, weaknesses. We're acknowledging the areas that we need to grow in. And then we're also learning to share and utilize and pay attention to our talents, gifts, and skills for the betterment of ourselves and our development, as well as for the community.

So, of course, that translates into social justice people, constantly being intentional about our whole world.

Another aspect is community. We have this living-learning community, the cultivation of this desire, commitment, and passion and responsibility to engage with those who are, who think, who act different than ourselves.

And another element to our education is a cross-cultural experience. We don't have traditional requirements, that the University would, say in an English Department or a Math Department. But we do have requirements like this cross-cultural experience. And for me, what I see that as are creating moments of disequilibrium, it's moments where you can put yourself into a place of discomfort. Where you're not the majority, where you're caused to humble yourself, to be in a place where you can listen, just engage in that way, which cultivates open-mindedness, critical thinking, curiosity.

We have a depth and breadth component to our contracts. We go in depth, for me—social change and music and religious studies, but then there's the breadth aspect to open myself to other possibilities. With integrative studies, individualized settings, independent studies. Not just accepting what you've been told, not just following the crowd, thinking outside of the box, particularly in questioning the norm, not being afraid to break the mold, being intentional, deconstructing our own self, in order to better understand all those pieces again, which is inherently transformational. And so, what we do, what we learn, and what we become, translates into how we are in the world. (Fernando, 2014)

A 2005 alumna embodies the *expressive* telos, focusing on creativity in public service positions in her professional and avocational life. She identifies an openness at Johnston for affirming that creativity:

I think the openness of the Johnston community, even in the willingness to let you flounder and fail, it allows you to build or flex that creative muscle in

a way that other programs will say “Great! You’re eighteen. Here’s the book, don’t think outside of it.” It trains the way that you think about ideas and think about your interactions with them. Even though a lot of us may have spent time floundering and failing and now looking back and saying, “That may not have been the best use of my time,” the habit of that creativity is more active. (Interview 34.7.12.14)

A 1993 graduate who entered Johnston with a strong commitment to social justice and works as a seasoned community organizer affirms how fully a Johnston education enabled his own process of discernment and self-understanding:

I sense that the graduation contract process, writing it, proposing it, going before a committee, and a grad review, really forces you to articulate what the importance is of what you’re studying and why. Both what it means to you, and what it means to the world, which is very different than just meeting the requirements of a given major. I think that experience is really important, and also something that you could export... I think it forces you to think of education in a different way. (Interview 39.2.12.15)

When this graduate, who has dedicated his life to pursuing justice, was asked whether Johnston fosters a commitment to social transformation, he expressed ambivalence:

I don’t know. It’s certainly good preparation for working on social transformation. It’s also good preparation for working on business or creative projects or anything else where people need to interact with each other in groups. I don’t know if there’s anything inherent in the process of Johnston that awakens people toward social transformation. Certainly, there are plenty of people that went to other kinds of colleges who either came or left with strong activist, or social justice orientations. It’s also relatively physically isolated from large urban centers. Mostly white, in a pretty privileged location, which again isn’t inherent to any of the methodology and things.

In that sense, I was in really powerful dialogue with people, but with a pretty narrow slice of the world, and had to work pretty consciously to be engaged with more of the world or a more diverse group of people, with most of the people who are directly affected by the problems that I care most about. I don’t know that it either gave or took away a social consciousness, or social ideas from people. Although, I think it was a useful place to explore and develop them. (Interview 39.2.12.15)

These insights are consistent with the equivocal perspective we've gleaned. On the one hand, the question we asked in our survey, "I am or was involved in social justice, civic or community activities," had a mixed response. We cannot claim a significant increase, or decrease, in self-identified commitments to social justice or civic activism attributable to a Johnston education. On the other hand, while the evidence may not be able to affirm that a Johnston education (or perhaps other *eutopian* educational experiences) promotes civic or social justice activism, it clearly provides a supportive community environment for students to courageously practice communal care, mutual responsibility, consideration for others, and living with integrity. As we have previously noted, there is a great diversity of Johnston experiences. While some alumni have explicit commitments to civic and social justice work, which their Johnston education served well, many others don't. However, even alumni who do not identify as being actively civically engaged or working in social justice settings shared that they are energized by intentionally belonging to, deepening, and often leading, their respective communities. For those who do exercise those commitments in a recognized civic or social justice context, the living-learning experience enables them to flourish and refine their critical praxis by carrying out their values on the micro scale.

What we want to highlight here across the experiences of alumni who engaged deeply in their Johnston education is that they cultivate a certain approach to participating in, supporting, and leading their communities. In doing so, they practice Deweyan democracy—by attending to each of the members of their community as full persons with rich views and needs, and by developing consensus-based decisions to achieve common ends. This too, we contend is a kind of foundational civic and social justice practice. It lends, as we hope to further demonstrate, to the ability of communities to make beneficial lasting changes and to furthering their shared values.

### ALUMNI INTERVIEWS: LEARNING CONSENSUS-BASED COMMUNITY ORGANIZING

Artist and academic Lisa Beth Robinson, a 1991 alumna, explained that she learned at Johnston "an empathy for the world met with a conviction and intelligence that we could change it, and the analytical skills to make things happen" (Robinson, 2019, p. 54).

Nina Fernando, a 2011 alumna whose emphasis was “Social Change through Music and Religious Studies,” asserts that she embodies her graduation narrative daily:

I see how religion plays a role in shaping and moving society, for better and for worse. I’ve worked as a multifaith community organizer, educating, organizing and mobilizing religious leaders of all traditions to stand in solidarity with workers, immigrants, and those impacted by hate and discrimination. I made the choice to work with people who don’t look or think like me to make our communities more just and equitable. I still sing and write music too: at protests, vigils and congregations, as well as bars, weddings, and my living room. This intersection, my emphasis, continues to unfold in new ways. And it is because of Johnston that I know now how to be intentional about it. (Fernando, 2019, p. 250)

Johnston calls people with a strong sense of agency and among them are those who bring or develop a self-identified social justice, civic, or public service orientation. Once on campus, the support of their *eutopian* educational community throughout their undergraduate experience helps them hone skills for their future vocation.

In her essay, “Owning our Education,” faculty member Kathy Ogren quotes a 1992 alumnus, Chris Mangham, who, as a student, co-taught a class on African American Literature in 1991. He reflects,

Reading, seeing and talking about lives other than my own in a context where one is explicitly charged with membership in a community created a dynamic where what I was reading translated directly into inquiry and empathy with those I lived among. (As cited in Ogren, 2019, p. 58)

A 1974 alumnus was clear that, more than ideas, how people express their convictions through how they live determines whether social change takes place. “Social change is not an idea, it’s a way of being and it’s modeling... I’d rather see a lesson than hear one any day. I’d rather you walk with me than merely show the way. It’s a pebble in the pond” (Interview 31.12.29.14).

Indeed, in a small, informal, egalitarian setting where community is integral to the undergraduate experience, witnessing people expressing and embodying their convictions can awaken profound connections. This leader is appreciative for a life-long relationship with his faculty mentor, and now, dear friend:

The phenomenology of having that many adult models of people who are passionate about what they are teaching and learning alongside students. It's hard to have that continuously but what I shared with [him] over the years, when I call him, when he writes me, it's one of the most important ingredients of my well-being. It's a friendship that has transcended every part of life.

That doesn't happen often. We're talking about a relationship that I will take to my grave. That wasn't happenstance, that was by design; that was Johnston's design... This small school etched living into my soul... In terms of criteria for impactful education, mind blowing. Way beyond expectations. (Interview 31.12.29.14)

For many students, lasting relationships were forged through argument, and developed and strengthened in community meetings where the practice of consensus prevailed. Consensus was not always an easy process. The 1993 graduate who has been a community organizer for three decades observed:

I was at all the community meetings. It was interesting. It felt like on one hand it was big part of the experience, that learning to work and operate in the consensus-based system, both taught interesting and useful lessons for the rest of life. That it was a deeply engaging process. Certainly, all of the learning and other things that took place happened in the context of this community.

On the other hand, also from the first community meeting I was at, there was this sense of crisis: Is the community coming apart? Does consensus work? Is the community as we knew it dead or thriving or does it need to be reborn? Certainly, there was a lot of it that was either troubled or took a long time to do simple things, or in some way myopic or narrowly, not self-centered, but centered to the needs and desires of a very small group of people about it too. I don't want to overly idealize it, but it was certainly a big and important part of the experience. (Interview 39.2.12.15)

And yet, as complex and contentious as consensus can be, many alumni spoke of its significance and attributed their commitment to the community to the process of consensus building. In an essay entitled, "Community in Constraint," 2003 alumna Cole Cohen writes, "Through consensus, we learn that there is a reservoir of compassion, an individual capacity for investing in the needs of others, within each of us that is greater than we

knew” (Cohen, 2019, p. 103). It is through this process of self-critical reflection that students also learn to identify and practice their ideals, for and with one another.

That said, not everyone engaged in social justice found the weekly community meetings to be useful. Some rightly recognized the insularity of the issues that were often addressed. A 1979 alumnus recounted his efforts to bring an important spokesperson for the United Farm Workers to campus and was frustrated and disappointed that fewer than ten people showed up to the program. Yet, he noted, in the same week, two hundred people attended a community meeting “and it’s all about dogs” (Interview 23.7.10.15). No doubt there are times when the community gets lost in a myopic focus on itself. Yet, the orientation of communities like Johnston, affirming that the “personal is political,” can also lay the foundation for a grounded engagement with broader issues.

Julie Townsend, immediate past Director of the Johnston Center, and Tim Seiber, Johnston ’04 and current Director understand that while less consequential concerns are often treated in community meetings, they argue that those issues can provide practice for more fundamental and potentially conflictual social and communal ones:

Whatever the topic, the deliberative pattern is crucial: issues are brought to the attention of the entire community—faculty, staff and students—and are discussed in a structured format, every week, without fail, throughout the semester. The everyday life of the center, its quotidian difficulties, teach us all how to be better negotiators, advocates, and speakers. They, in some ways, prepare us for emergent and emergency conversations as these topics make their way into our thoughts, our institution, our spaces.

Debates in a consensus community tend to range from the banal to the crucial. Typically, this process is effective at bringing most members of the community into at least passing agreement. The way it functions is to continue open dialogue about an issue until an agreement of all community members present can be achieved. This agreement does not mean that all are exactly in agreement, but rather that all members can live with a collective decision. If a member cannot live with the outcome of a decision, they may block its enforcement until further discussion is had. This process is applied to all proposals, from funding for a dinner to policies regarding racial discourse.



...the job of a consensus community is to seek creative ways forward that take us out of this either/or dilemma: either the students of color are subject to a racist climate OR white students feel comfortable speaking. The very structure of consensus models acknowledges that binaries cannot adequately address complex social problems. (Townsend & Seiber, 2018, p. 57, 62, and 64)

Current Johnston faculty realize that incoming students may not understand this living-learning component of Johnston's educational philosophy that can transcend socio-political binaries. For that reason, they intentionally create learning opportunities for students to partake fully in it. Former Johnston Director and current professor Kelly Hankin shared,

I think most students enter into Johnston, not all, but most students enter into Johnston, not understanding the relationship to community, not knowing what they're getting into. And then to see them transform into thinking relationships. How decisions are being manifest in the context of different constituents and communities, within the community. (Kelly Hankin Interview, 12.9.09)

Townsend, who followed Hankin as Johnston Director realized that "first year students have little or no training in a consensus model, in how to speak in public, how to exchange ideas, go in depth and have disagreement and keep moving through that." She organized a salon class, inviting faculty, students, and artists to share work or ideas or performances on a theme, and then use that material to generate an intentional conversation. The model eventually traveled through the community; students who were not in the class have carried forth the concept; it is now embedded in the culture (Julie Townsend Interview, 12.9.09).

As should be clear from our interviews, this training shapes the way alumni do their community organizing work, whether implicitly or explicitly. It has also proven crucial now that Johnston and the University of Redlands serve a much more diverse student body than in previous decades, and must face, with the rest of the country, how to address police brutality, white-supremacy, sexual violence, and other central issues of injustice.

## ALUMNI INTERVIEWS: A NEW WAVE OF ACTIVISM AT JOHNSTON

While feminist activism has always been essential to Johnston and was often mentioned as an enduring commitment of our interviewees, in the past decade, deeper and more nuanced questions of gender, sexuality, race, and justice have become more salient on campus, as they have across the higher education landscape. This coincided with the student body of Johnston and the University of Redlands becoming increasingly diverse, serving more local students of non-white heritage. For example, Redlands is now recognized by the State of California as a Hispanic Serving Institute (HSI).<sup>4</sup> Faculty have also noted that the students are often initiators and teachers of communal learning around these issues. The recent graduates we interviewed seem to be more intentional in incorporating social justice and public service into their education and their graduation emphases than were previous generations.

In the 2015–2016 academic year, precipitated by an experience of cultural appropriation that galvanized awareness and activism throughout the university, Johnston students envisioned, initiated, and hosted a three-day conference for California campus leaders to explore race and inequality in higher education. The organizers had never attended, let alone planned, such a complex and potentially fraught endeavor (Townsend & Seiber, 2018); consequently, they did what Johnston students do when they want to learn—they created a course to research the issues, sought mentors, and engaged in experiential, *eutopian* education, integrating the academic and the applied. Attendees from other campuses were “in awe of the space we had created as a group and the ability for Johnston and the university to support a conference like ours” (As cited in Yu & Emmons, 2017). On the heels of campus fora and the highly successful conference—the largest student-run conference in Johnston or the University of Redlands history—they contracted for another academic course, educating themselves and future planners to organize subsequent annual conferences and understand more deeply the complexity and possibilities of addressing racial in/justice in higher education.

A 2018 graduate who had been active in the community, and is now a social worker, participated in the leadership of the Race on Campus

<sup>4</sup> See <https://www.hacu.net/assnfe/cv.asp?ID=4875>, assessed on October 5, 2022.

conference for multiple years. She drew a direct line from Johnston's educational philosophy to the creation of the conference:

A Johnston education was necessary for this to happen because we were all practiced in thinking outside the box, being engaged with our learning and also, knowing that our lives and learning, what happens in and out of the classroom, are not separate. (Interview 53.7.6.22)

Like many other alumni, she highlights the importance of the communal orientation of Johnston for engagement in social justice work:

This is different than taking a Race and Ethnic Studies class in a mostly white university. It's not the same as talking about race in an abstract way. It's talking about it as a community issue... these are the ways that this is impacting our community... That gets people's attention in a different way. (Interview 53.7.6.22)

This alumna identified Johnston's tradition of consensus as central to her commitment to racial justice:

I think real consensus is anti-racist work. It's making sure that everybody's needs are met and that we are all considering everyone, even if they're only one voice. This is the work of being able to communicate with each other when there's a mess or there's harm... Johnston asks people to care about community—it's a core tenet of being there—and caring about community means caring about everyone, learning about people who are different from you and not just in a theoretical way, but through living with them. Consensus is really about taking everyone's needs into consideration, building empathy and awareness and critical thought—all things that you need to be centered in social justice. (Interview 53.7.6.22)

The 2016 graduate who raised his voice to call attention to cultural ignorance and subsequently conceived and spurred the community to shape the Race on Campus conference discussed how his devotion to the Johnston community undergirded his leadership and his desire to make change:

James Baldwin talks about this a lot... I love this place. This place that I love and has taught me so much is so behind in terms of diversity and race... it's a predominantly white space, a second and third generation college student white space, so people are timid about this. I love this place and this place is lacking here and I want to change that. And actually, even the people who

are timid about this, they care. I can see, they're like, "I don't know how to talk about this, but I'm going to show up. I care about you though so I'm going to take this seriously, not just, I care about this because I should, but because I love you and I love this place." (Interview 54.7.13.22)

He further affirmed that participating in the public square at Johnston made it possible, not only to dive into a major effort for which he had no prior experience, but also to navigate the complex terrain of racial in/justice:

I think Johnston is such a skill-building place and I don't think it gets a lot of credit for that explicitly. I think... innovation in this work [of racial justice] is always morphing and multi-faceted. Multi-faceted problems and solutions, you can't get that from rigid forms of education. I think you have to be in places where... [you're] able to think in a multi-prong setting and apply some of these learnings to these amorphous issues... How do I look at this problem and what are other people considering, or what am I not considering? How can I think about this differently? I have the skills to think about it differently. Johnston has equipped me with a really sharp lens of critical thought that builds itself well to work around social justice... Johnston's kind of learning lends itself to having so many windows of opportunity for people to transform themselves. (Interview 54.7.13.22)

The initiator of the Race on Campus conference also reflected movingly about the transformative power of listening thoughtfully and fully to others, a quality greatly appreciated in his ongoing professional work educating on diversity, equity, and inclusion:

Johnston prepared me so well for this new field of work that is social justice oriented. I'm learning how rare of a skill it is to be a critical thinker and attentive listener... When moments of tension arise in the world, people ask, "Who's going to handle this conversation?" There are so many people at Johnston who could facilitate a conversation like that or be a good listener and contribute and ask good questions that open up a conversation further... Johnston continues to nourish me. (Interview 54.7.13.22)

An early admissions poster for Johnston declared: "Johnston College does not aim simply to be different. Its goal is to make a difference... in education, in the lives of its members, in the world we live." As these alumni affirm, for over half a century, Johnston has continued to fulfill that promise.

## LESSONS FOR AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE

One of the intentions of this volume is to be useful to schools that do not identify as “maverick” or “progressive” but are open to initiatives that affirm the ideals of innovative-*eutopian* education. Every campus has its own culture. Upon inquiring what qualities of their Johnston education might translate to the broader realm of higher education, nearly all our interviewees referenced student agency and self-authorship, the living-learning community, the quality of relationships with mentors, and the emphasis on the art of teaching.

A 2005 alumnus understood that many of the best practices in higher education can be found throughout the landscape and appreciated having so many of them in one place:

Johnston brings together every best practice that matters in higher education: small class sizes, relevant learning, contact with professors, collaborative relationships with colleagues, deepenings on community and what it means to be a citizen of the world, and intellectual inquiry with and without ego, etc. Most everyone I know found some aspect of this experience at an array of other types of colleges, but rarely all in one place as we were so privileged to have. It was also all right there for us when we walked in the door; we didn't have to seek it out as others I know are forced to do at more traditional institutions. The amazing experience and learning is not unique to Johnston, it's just a lot easier to have once you arrive. (Interview 32.12.22.15)

That said, some alumni had conflicting beliefs about whether such learning is simply harder, or perhaps even available, elsewhere. A 1991 graduate who became an educator, and who himself teaches in a progressive college, initially insisted that Johnston's pedagogy would not translate to traditional institutions:

My experience is that it doesn't work piecemeal. That the beauty of Johnston is that you have an entire system, an entire community that is reinforcing that system. So, it is the ecosystem or the atmosphere in which everybody operates... If you're an individual instructor you can make marginal progress, but... I'm swimming upstream.

Yet, even as he argued, he realized that certain elements of Johnston's education, such as narrative evaluations and discourse across difference, were fundamental to and integrated into his own pedagogy, and to the

leadership he provides to his colleagues to help them innovate and improve their own teaching (Interview 38.1.7.15).

Other interviewees were encouraging about translating Johnston's practices to traditional campuses, as even this skeptical alumnus partially conceded. A college professor who spent his undergraduate years at a large state university came to know Johnston both through family members who had been undergraduates there as well as through his own participation in Johnston alumni summer seminars. He identified the qualities of Johnston learners that inspired him, which he emulated in his own teaching. He spoke of

a common respect for hearing out diverse voices and patiently listening rather than jumping in and dominating conversation. The Johnston model encourages patience, and self-expression, which asserts one's view without shutting others out. It allows innovation from younger people, who plan their education, rather than consume it from teachers. Professors are more partners and mentors and serve as role models. This active exchange, and placement of trust in students... brings confidence to Johnstonians nurtured and supported to take their ideas, and those of their peers and mentors, seriously (but seasoned with humor and communal camaraderie). The experimental education is simply that: giving students more say in how they want to attain knowledge and cultivate wisdom. (Survey Respondent 97)

The 1993 graduate who has worked as a community organizer throughout his career and remains an avid reader of literature and faithful attender of Johnston summer seminars, which bring together generations of former students to study with beloved faculty, noted how fortunate he was to have such excellent teachers. He acknowledges that equally gifted educators can be found wherever teaching is valued:

There's just a quality to the teaching of many of the great teachers that I had at Johnston that I think probably exist in some times and places in addition, but was definitely valued and heightened there. That teaching as an art is just really valued, and that professors who had real intellectual pursuits of their own were really deeply engaged with students. That has to do with that teaching being valued in Johnston and in Redlands, to be fair. (Interview 39.2.12.15)

He also recognized that peers from other small schools may have received many of the same benefits he did:

The system for negotiating contracts, for helping to design classes, for doing consensus-based work, it was certainly different from how things worked at other colleges, and I think good preparation for doing both community organizing, and activist stuff, and other professional work for the rest of life, and going to graduate school. I think at the time and for years I felt like that was really unique to Johnston. From more years later I'm not sure. I think I see it now as more contiguous with what people's experiences was in many small, private colleges. That it's maybe more a matter of degree than kind. That level of attention and being able to have agency, essentially. Having smarter and much better educated people take your ideas really seriously when you're between eighteen and twenty-two, which is something that a small, private college does to you. From a little farther distance, I think maybe it's a matter of degree more so than a totally different experience. (Interview 39.2.12.15)

Matt Gray, a 2005 graduate, wrote that Johnston matters to him even more now than when he was a student. He describes how he teaches others the power of consensus and integrity in his professional life, how he builds coalitions to make change in his civic life and how he passes on to his children the Johnston ethos of collaboration, intelligence, and kindness in his family life. But as much as he appreciates his past and present, his experiences make him hopeful for the future:

This is where my individual story is not so individual. As I look around at my classmates from Johnston, I see them out living lives they designed, fought for, and negotiated. Johnston gave us the skills necessary to create such lives.

So while it's fun to wander down memory lane and celebrate the good times, it's even more invigorating to look toward the horizon, where the impact of Johnston can be seen in every aspect of our lives. Johnston matters now because of what it has allowed us to do, but even more important, Johnston matters because of the world that Johnston and the Johnston Alumni Community are out creating every day. (Gray, 2019, pp. 226–227)

These alumni are bringing the skills and the ideals they practiced at Johnston to encourage and embolden learners, leaders, and citizens within and beyond higher education. While such practices may change with time and context, they are fostered by understanding students to be civic partners, treating them with a passion and conviction that the whole person

matters and that ongoing dialogue across difference makes possible communities built on authenticity and integrity.

Current and emeriti Johnston faculty members who were trained and taught in research universities and liberal arts colleges believe that much of what works at Johnston translates well to other campuses—excellent teaching, caring for the whole student, providing opportunities to flesh out their ideas and develop new knowledge, and helping them to attain the tools they need to engage with the world. One encourages her colleagues in more traditional institutions to be open to structural change, to incorporate pedagogy into their thinking about their own research, and to enjoy the gifts of collaboration both within and beyond the disciplines they are trained in (Interview 9.11.9.09). Another sees Johnston as profoundly American in the tradition of Brook Farm and the history of American communal life. He hopes that the qualities of entrepreneurship, innovation, and negotiation will flourish elsewhere (Interview 5.11.9.09).

Another described his role as an educator as

keeping on a knife's edge between a very reactionary business or conservative business of teaching people established skills that keep the people with power in power—how to write, use footnotes properly, how to do bibliographies. All those standardized skills... you have to teach these to people to give people a voice going into the larger world.

At the same time, one of my other responsibilities as a Johnston professor is to teach people how to use these in a disruptive way. In a way that they can present the case for what they are doing with their lives. For those people who Derrida calls the “specters,” who in the dominant discourse are relegated to the status of ghosts, of people who aren't taken seriously, who don't really exist.

I think one of the most gratifying things about Johnston is it taught people to get out in the world and negotiate and speak eloquently for those who were silenced, for the ghosts, people who, increasingly in this corporate world, are becoming less and less physical, less and less taken seriously except as a scapegoat to the far right, who condemn them for moral lassitude and corruption. So, one of the great things Johnston does is create people who really want to embrace the cause of silent people. In a country that I think is rapidly losing hope of a sense that individual citizens can make a difference, we keep producing people who have that kind of crazy hope which is just as wild and as colorful as the dreams that pushed Jack Kerouac and



Thomas Wolfe, that got me turned on when I was fifteen, twenty. I think we do an okay job, despite our own limitations. (O’Neill, 2014)

Our alumni interviewees are a testament to Johnston doing far more than “an okay job.” They have embodied the democratic values that prepared them to maintain hope and strengthen community. So do many other schools. Most institutions of higher learning are adept at the first responsibility articulated here; many faculty are committed to the second one as well. What historically *eutopian* schools such as Johnston, with student-centered, holistic, character-driven, and personalized pedagogy practiced in democratic communities, can provide is strength to maintain the ideals that underpin higher education and courage to keep them alive even in dark periods in our history.

In the 1930s, an earlier dark period, Alexander Meiklejohn, who conceived and created The Experimental College of the University of Wisconsin—a precursor to many of the experimental schools of the 1960s—understood how essential it was to teach students to be educated citizens, to be free, to take their place in a democracy. He wrote,

Far deeper, then, than any question of curriculum or teaching method or determining conditions is the problem of restoring the courage of Americans, academic or non-academic, for the facing of the essential issues of life. How can it be brought about that the teachers in our colleges and universities shall see themselves, not only as the servants of scholarship, but also, in a far deeper sense, as the creators of the national intelligence? If they lose courage in that endeavor, in whom may we expect to find it? Intelligence, wisdom, sensitiveness, generosity, these cannot be set aside from our planning, to be, as it were, byproducts of the scholarly pursuits. They are the ends which all our scholarship and teaching serve. (Meiklejohn, 2001, p. 318)

Restoring the courage of Americans for facing the essential issues of life. Helping teachers in higher education to see themselves as creators of the national intelligence. Interrogating what and for whom our scholarship and teaching serves. These *eutopian* imperatives live on.

The lesson from the experience of Johnston, then, is not merely whether some of the unique structures of this mode of education can be incorporated into other settings; it is essential to cultivate an *eutopian* ethos, to promote an environment for the whole person to be both educator and

educated, inspiring those within it to articulate and actualize a vision of a more equitable, just, and thoughtful world.

While there are no easy solutions for these perilous times, we are heartened that the road traversed by innovators in higher education from Alexander Meiklejohn to the present, heightening awareness of the problems and possibilities in our communities and country, preparing young people to create a world with more opportunity and openness, and educating citizens—has become better traveled.<sup>5</sup> A bedrock belief of higher education is the promise of a better future. John Dewey reminds us, “democracy has to be born anew every generation and education is its midwife” (Dewey, 2008b, p. 139). As we journey through new territory discovering more about the wisdom and courage that historically innovative schools have instilled in their alumni,<sup>6</sup> we look forward to the higher education community fulfilling its vast potential as guardians of democracy, custodians of the past, and architects of and midwives to a worthy future.

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<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Ron Daniels, *What Universities Owe Democracy* (2021); or National Task Force on Civic Learning and Engagement (2012).

<sup>6</sup> We plan an extended monograph to trace more fully some of the stories we have touched on in this essay.

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# Empowering Students Through Evaluation: Over 50 Years Without Grades at Hampshire College

*Laura Wenk*

## INTRODUCTION

We are all some 70 years out from the cognitive revolution. Much has been learned and written about the importance of having a metacognitive approach to learning, one which explicitly teaches students strategies for success and asks them to focus on their own abilities, understanding, and knowledge gaps, and to set goals for themselves (National Research Council, 2000). Yet, as a society we still have notions of schooling that privilege testing and grades meted out by teachers as the main measure of learning—the *sine qua non* of schooling.

For over 50 years, faculty at Hampshire College have not given a single grade to any of our students. Instead, faculty have written narrative evaluations to evaluate students' work with suggestions for their next steps.

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And they have asked learners to set their own goals, develop their own course of study and reflect on their own learning. The institution has developed a system of contracts, narrative and self-evaluation, and portfolios, each piece of which is designed to center learning and empower students. Faculty methods of evaluating students is tied to a relational and individualized way of working with students that encourages independent thinking so that students to grow to their fullest potential, embodying our motto *non satis scire*, or “to know is not enough.”

Hampshire’s mission relative to our students is “to foster a lifelong passion for learning, inquiry, and ethical citizenship that inspires students to contribute to knowledge, justice, and positive change in the world.” We want our students to “take charge of their own intellectual and artistic development and integrate an active, independent, critical, and reflective perspective into their lives as a whole. We aim to graduate lifelong learners with the courage to challenge boundaries, ask questions, and ignite knowledge with creativity” (Hampshire College, 2023a). Lofty aims, yes, but also totally dependent on centering student learning and creating an environment in which students are free to explore, try out new ideas, and not be afraid to take risks. I can’t imagine our students making the bold moves they do if they were concerned about grades.

Despite having various components in our evaluation system at Hampshire, the fact that we do not grade students stands out in contrast with other institutions and has become our defining feature. Yet, our narrative evaluations are only one part of our curricular ecosystem that emphasizes the holistic development of students in and out of the classroom. In this chapter, I describe our system with the hopes that the ideas behind what we do, and the effects our practices have on students, could encourage others to experiment with new learning-centered ways to assess students and support their metacognitive abilities.

As the Dean of Curriculum and Assessment for seven years and the current Director of Assessment, I have completed interview studies designed to understand the student experience at Hampshire and I have worked with colleagues to directly examine students’ reflective writing. As a result, we have learned that narrative evaluations coupled with self-evaluation and reflective portfolio-building develop students’ integrative thinking and goal-setting in sophisticated ways. Our evaluation system emphasizes reflexivity and requires active engagement of learners in explicit conversations about their developing practical skills and theoretical understandings. We know that what we ask of students is complex. We

also firmly believe that the effort is well worth it with regards to its potential effect on student learning and on their lifelong learning efforts.

In studies beyond Hampshire, the combination of feedback from faculty and student self-evaluation has been shown to lead to greater gains in student performance than either practice alone (Logan, 2015; Olina & Sullivan, 2004). Faculty narrative evaluations detail student achievement from the faculty perspective, often making clear the next challenges for a student to address. Self-evaluation leads to the students' internalizing the strategies necessary for success and to a deeper understanding of the objectives of an activity (White & Frederiksen, 1998; Palincsar & Brown, 1984). The support for the practices of student goal-setting and self-evaluation as important educational practices comes from a number of literatures that emphasize learners as actively seeking understanding, including self-regulated learning (Schunk & Zimmerman, 2013) and metacognition (National Research Council, 2000).

Hampshire is not alone in using narrative evaluations or student self-evaluations to improve learning. There are a number of institutions in the learner-centered group of institutions in the Consortium for Innovative Environments in Learning (CIEL) that do so—Evergreen State College, New College of Florida, Bennington College, Prescott College, and Fairhaven College also use narrative evaluation, although often accompanied by grades or shadow grades that lead to a GPA or with the use of a pass/fail system. A number of institutions outside CIEL also do so. These include Alverno, Reed, Brown, and Antioch University. Others, like University of California at Santa Cruz, have given up narrative evaluation due to the implications for faculty workload, which is a real concern given the careful consideration necessary to craft a narrative evaluation. The practice is one that reflects a fundamental interest in student learning first, which is something that unites the CIEL colleges.

Writing narratives definitely takes more time than grading, but the trade-off is in the strengthened relationship between faculty and student and in student development. Grading puts faculty in an adversarial role vis a vis their students. By NOT grading, I am on my students' side. And, they can dig in, be creative, and make choices about where to put their energy. As a faculty member at Hampshire, I have only once had a student question their narrative evaluation in the 23 years I've taught at the institution. Of course, it helps that Hampshire has small class sizes (typically 12–24 students per class) and that we have done faculty development work to make the system more streamlined and less time consuming—an

effort we intend to continue as faculty workload is increasing at Hampshire, as it is at many colleges. Occasionally, a faculty member or two will suggest we move to grades in order to reduce workload or to be more efficient, but many more will choose effectiveness over efficiency and insist that moving to grades would undermine the purpose and goals of Hampshire College.

ePortfolios are another assessment tool that can increase reflection and goal-setting. Over 50% of colleges and universities now have some type of ePortfolio project. ePortfolios can increase integrative thinking, helping students make meaning across their courses, internships, and community-engaged experiences. They can also create a synergy among programs and faculty across an institution (Eynon & Gambino, 2017), leading to a more coherent experience for students. In studies across a number of institutions, the Connect to Learning project (Eynon et al., 2014) demonstrated that when sustained ePortfolio programs were in place there were marked improvements in student success, with increased retention, higher pass rates, and higher GPA's (I cite this ironically and as an imperfect proxy for student learning). Though at many institutions, ePortfolios are not used to develop reflection, but rather, simply make student work visible for assessment purposes. In these cases, faculty and assessment staff score student work in order to report to accreditors, and the portfolios are not expected to be sites of deep learning.

Before sharing our practice, I first address some of the problems with grades and the reasons Hampshire College has never considered using them.

### PROBLEMS WITH GRADES—THE UNGRADING MOVEMENT

The pervasive use of grades from kindergarten through college can lead us to believe that grading is an important and inescapable part of schooling. As a nation, we have taken grades to be a given and have not questioned the underlying assumptions about grades, nor has the Higher Education community, until recently, interrogated the effects of grading or considered alternatives. That discussion has recently begun.

Much of our blindness to the issue of grading is derived from false ideas about motivation and the lack of attention to the ways that grading increases inequality. First, although many believe that grades are important for giving students incentive to work harder, there are different ways students can get higher grades. They can either work harder or simply



select easier work. There is evidence that in graded situations, many students choose the latter (National Research Council, 2018; Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Harter, 1978), actually working less hard as a result of grades. Another way to look at this is that when the focus is on grades, students might develop performance goals rather than learning goals (Dweck & Leggett, 1988) and shift their behaviors to get a higher evaluation of their work while thwarting goals for true mastery. Grades discourage the very risk-taking that might lead to deeper learning. Second, grades are used to sort individuals and restrict access to future resources for students who don't "make the grade." As such, grades increase inequality. And third, grading adds to student anxiety, which itself impedes learning. This is especially important as we find ourselves in an epidemic of college student anxiety (American College Health Association, 2018).

Another way to see these issues is that students can perceive grades as coercive, and they behave, perhaps appropriately, in ways that resist coercion. They find ways around tasks, do the minimum to satisfy requirements, or they cheat—this especially if they see that being graded unfairly limits their future choices, or if the prospect of being graded increases their anxiety. Our students are adults and we can collaborate with them to build a trusting classroom environment that supports risk-taking, the development of individual goals, and a culture of doing good work together.

At Hampshire, we are lucky that our institution does not compel us to grade. We do not have shadow grades that lead to a GPA, nor will Hampshire convert a student's record to grades after the fact—even if asked by a graduate program to do so. Still, we have a strong track record of getting our students into excellent graduate programs with 65% of our graduates earning advanced degrees within ten years of graduating.

Individual faculty at more traditional colleges and universities have begun to stop grading or to decrease the importance of grades in a movement called "ungrading." Hampshire and other pioneering institutions have likely paved the way for this movement. Ungrading has become increasingly popular among pedagogical experts who are making compelling cases for doing away with grades. They speak persuasively about the problems with grades and are sharing the practices they use that abolish grades completely or minimize the use of point systems or grades. These faculty are focusing instead on giving students frequent, specific feedback on their work that helps them make gains relative to course learning objectives, and they are urging others to do the same. Many faculty would like

to do so, but are compelled to grade by their institutions and dare not make any changes until tenured. You can read many of their reasons and methods in Susan Blum’s edited volume entitled “Ungrading” (2020).

Despite persuasive arguments, I know of no institution that has abolished grades as a result of the ungrading movement, even though it is clear that doing so at the institutional level rather than the individual faculty level would have a much greater effect on the student experience. I imagine the resistance is due to financial expense or to fears about reputation. Narrative evaluation requires a lower student to instructor ratio in a course (either reducing class size or adding staffing). And grades have been used to connote rigor. If an institution gives up grades, they might fear they will be seen as less demanding. If an institution is unwilling or unable to make these changes, there are other ways to minimize grading.

Our system is somewhat novel and every institution has to make choices that are in keeping with their mission, finding their own ways to reduce the potential harm of grades that is sustainable given their class sizes and the other demands on their faculty. It is well worth understanding our system. There are components that would make a difference at any institution, regardless of its size—particularly our focus on student self-evaluation, ePortfolio development, and reflective writing. After all, it is more important for students’ futures that they are able to monitor their own learning, set goals, and make plans to ensure they meet their goals than it is that they have received specific assessments from a professor. Shortly after graduating, what we as faculty had to say becomes irrelevant, but what our students understand about their own process continues to matter. To that end I share Hampshire’s narrative evaluation system to demonstrate how a coherent system can be implemented at the institutional level while graduating successful, inquisitive, lifelong learners.

### THE HAMPSHIRE COLLEGE NARRATIVE EVALUATION SYSTEM

The components of our system are connected through what we call our “Divisional System.” Students move through three Divisions at Hampshire:

- Division I, or the first-year program, is about exploration with a transdisciplinary approach, about taking more responsibility for one’s learning, and about learning to self-evaluate. Students receive a narrative evaluation from faculty for each of their courses and write

self-evaluations for each as well. At the end of their first year, they write a reflective essay on their experiences.

- Division II, the middle two years are a student's individualized concentration. Students write a contract for their educational plan under the supervision of two faculty members and create an ePortfolio of their work, which includes a reflective retrospective essay on their learning over the four semesters. The ePortfolio is highly integrative, including work from courses, independent studies, internships, community-based projects, and more. It can include papers and media of all types. Students are expected to select works that demonstrate their growth and understanding in categories of their own choosing as well as with regards to institutional goals.
- Division III, students' fourth and final year is mainly devoted to a major project. Students craft a proposal for a substantive project overseen by two faculty members. The Division III is the central activity of a Hampshire Student's final year of study. It comprises a major piece of independent research that demonstrates a student's ability to handle complex questions, complex concepts, and research skills in the student's area of concentration. Students present their work in a final meeting, reflect on what they learned, and consider their next steps after Hampshire.

Students contract to complete an individualized course of study at each Division. This might include coursework, internships, independent studies, and/or study abroad.

As at more traditional institutions, our students receive formative feedback on individual pieces of work. But they also receive a summary narrative evaluation at the end of each course/learning experience that serves both formative and summative purposes. Since they are more nuanced than grades, they are valuable to students in helping them see their progress and set new directions. They are also summative in that they clearly articulate students' achievements to outside audiences, including graduate schools. And students are asked to write self-evaluations for each of their evaluated experiences.

Students' narrative evaluations are shared with their advisors and mentors. Both faculty narratives and student self-evaluations take place at the course level and also at the divisional level, synthesizing information from multiple sources to show patterns of growth. In order to demonstrate the ways that Hampshire students typically grow in their understanding of

themselves as learners as a result of self and faculty narrative evaluation, I have selected some faculty and self-evaluations from the same student. They are a good student, but not our best student. I follow the faculty narrative and student self-evaluation with their Division II evaluation to show how evaluation from individual learning experiences are synthesized at the divisional level.

### *Faculty Narrative Course Evaluations*

The Psychology of Language:

[The student]'s performance in this class was very good. [The student] had a good grasp on the fundamental concepts of the class, and she did well on the short answer assignments designed to assess students' ability to understand primary research articles. I was impressed by [the student]'s proposal. [The student] formulated a clear hypothesis, motivated it by discussing empirical evidence from the scholarly peer-reviewed literature, and was able to competently discuss prior research. [The student] gave clear definitions of her independent and dependent variables, and presented the reader with quantitative predictions that logically followed from her hypothesis.

### *Student Course Self-Evaluations*

Self-evaluation for the same course:

The course work for this class was very challenging and thought provoking. It was not easy to understand and the text, though helpful, still required close reading in order to be understood. The first paper we read was difficult for me because it was the first academic [primary research] paper I had read before, and my responses were not the best. The second paper we read was a bit easier for me, and my responses were much better. The third paper we read felt a bit easier to me as I was responding. Even though I found these difficult, I never reached out to the TA to get help, and looking back I should have been more engaged with the resources available to me because it would have helped me while working on the assignments and the final research proposal. I hope to do this in the future.

I found it difficult beginning the research proposal because I have never had to write a literature review before, and I know that I struggled a lot to complete that portion of my paper. On the contrary, I greatly enjoyed creating the procedure portion of the proposal. I am glad that this course has given me the chance to write one, and even though I am not sure how well

I will do, I hope to take this and apply it to future proposals I will have to write. I hope to be a psycholinguist, so this experience is extremely important for me.

I only missed one class, and I tried to be actively engaged. Due to my own time management, I often did not get enough sleep the night before and sometimes I had a hard time focusing in class because I was tired, and as I have noted in my other evaluations, I hope to work on my time management for next semester so that I can benefit better from my classes.

Below are a couple of brief excerpts from later course evaluations that demonstrate that this student took their own goals into account—going for extra help as needed—and also continued to improve on challenges they had in the Psychology of Language—specifically working on improving research proposals.

From Semantics:

[The student] did a good job on the seven problem sets. While there were errors here and there, [she] learned from her mistakes; she often attended office hours to make sure she would not make them again. She also asked clarifying questions to ensure that she would do top-notch work.

From Educational Research:

[The student's] research statement paper and her research proposal paper improved markedly over the semester. She incorporated feedback, reworked whole sections, and expanded the ideas in both papers.

This “conversation” between faculty narrative evaluations and student self-evaluations at the course level leads to a summary narrative at the end of the student’s individualized concentration. Here is this same student’s Division II evaluation:

### *Division II Evaluation*

Description: [The student] completed an extremely robust, creative and beautifully transdisciplinary concentration with an emphasis on linguistics, and writing comprised of 20 academic courses. While her courses were primarily in linguistics and writing, the scope of her work and her thinking spanned traditional linguistics, socio-linguistics, education, computer pro-

gramming and game design. She also served as a teaching assistant and pursued martial arts. [the student] made rich and fruitful connections across all she did as she worked to answer her questions about adaptation, considering the ways that language shifts to meet new functions whether through game design or crafting poetry. Even in her martial arts practice, [the student] considered the interplay between language, movement, and meaning coming to see her practice as a form of syntax. [The student] also pursued her questions about teaching and learning, thinking about how language is learned and affects future learning whether explicitly in socio-linguistic courses, discourse theory, or by creating a game to teach translation theory.

Chairperson's Comments: [The student] is praised in her narrative evaluations for her hard work, strong engagement with the material and with her peers. [the student]'s thoughtful contributions sparked interest in her classmates and deepened classroom conversations. She is praised too for her creative and integrative thinking. As one of her professors put it: "What I appreciated most was [the student]'s ability to look at problems and concepts from multiple perspectives." It is clear looking across [the student]'s work and evaluations that she took on difficult challenges and often exceeded her own and her professor's expectations.

[The student] presented her work in an ePortfolio. She wrote across a number of genres from creative writing and poetry to psychology and educational research proposals—each with increasing sophistication. Curating her work and reflecting on it helped her to see that much of what she did across her work was adaptation and that the forms of her work are not separable from the language she uses. One can see her creative use of patterns in her written work, especially in her poetry. She approaches her writing the way she approaches a linguistics problem, as a puzzle. She notes the rules, applies, and breaks them. The result is engaging and imaginative pieces.

[The student]'s study of linguistics spanned multiple topics, and while she sometimes felt she wanted more grounding in the fundamentals of linguistics, she took a great deal from her courses in phonology, semantics, and syntax and showed a strong ability to apply her learning in multiple contexts. As a case in point, [the student] finished her Division II with the realization that her experience and practice of various Japanese Martial Arts were foundational. She sees the connections between this practice and her ideas about language, syntax, and adaptation. She is interested in and is well poised to demonstrate that martial arts are a type of language. We trust that [the student] will bring her learning from multiple perspectives as well as her strong work ethic to bear on this work in Division III.

Students receive a similar type of evaluation for their Division III project. The first page of our transcript lists the courses completed. It is followed by the Division III evaluation—evaluating how the student ended their Hampshire career—followed by the Division II evaluation. All course evaluations are in a packet following these two highly important evaluations that articulate what the student was able to accomplish and what skills they developed along the way. Clearly, there is work involved in evaluating students in this way. But as a result of this system, students are not only gaining deep understanding of their strengths and challenges, making progress as a result, they are also not penalized for early failure. There is no low first-year grade dragging their GPA down; no low grade for taking risks that didn't pan out. In fact, risks are noted in a congratulatory way in the narratives, along with an evaluation of the learning that occurred as a result.

Because students are not only evaluating themselves and being evaluated at the course level, but being asked to engage in integrative thinking at the divisional level, they make meaning across theory and practice, and they find multiple sites for practicing the skills they need to develop in order to carry out a robust independent project in their final year at the College.

Hampshire has engineered a highly metacognitive approach to assessing learning that leads students to identify strengths and challenges and set new goals for themselves. A real strength of our system is in asking students to write self-evaluations, curate their work in an ePortfolio, and write reflective essays at specific milestones in their Hampshire careers. And yet, we are still known for our faculty narrative evaluations. It is our brightest start in a constellation of student-centered practices that reinforce one another and lead to increased student agency in their learning. Perhaps the real focus ought to be on students' self-evaluation and ePortfolio development.

### WHAT DO STUDENTS UNDERSTAND AND SAY ABOUT THE SYSTEM?

I have completed a number of studies of student engagement with the narrative evaluation system over the last eight years that included student satisfaction surveys, interview research, and content analysis of both faculty narrative evaluations and student reflective writing. The research was

important for taking stock of practices that we had taken-for-granted. An early study of students who were thriving at the College showed that many students who excelled made excellent use of narrative evaluation and self-evaluation in order to monitor their learning, set new goals, and develop their educational plan. An analysis of a later study across all students revealed that not all students at the College understand the importance of, or how to best make use of, self-evaluation and reflection.

Here are some examples of the things students who made good use of narrative and self-evaluations had to say:

[When] I've written self-evaluations ... it really felt like I was piecing things together that I'd never really put together in my head—that were sort of waiting to be put together. And I do think it contributed a lot to what I've gained here with learning about how I work. It's really good moving forward. You have to hash out exactly where you are in your process constantly ... But it's really important to know how you're feeling and where your interests are going ... knowing where you're at and how you can recognize how you've grown. I figured out a lot of different things in writing my self-evals about where I'm gonna go next.

The self-evals that you have to do for classes make you think, 'Well, actually what did I do well?' And, 'What could I have done better at this semester?' [Doing self-evaluations] definitely helped me identify my strengths and weaknesses pretty early on... [For example], 'Oh, I didn't speak up in class very much, but I wrote really good reflection papers.' That's good, but you also have to take it the next step, yourself, and [say], 'Ok, next semester I'm gonna do this differently' or, 'I'm gonna talk in class like once a week.' So, it helped me identify those things and think about ways to get better at stuff that I wasn't so good at. Sometimes it's just good to stop and think about what you're doing and reflect on it.

These students point out the ways that being asked to stop and reflect changes their experience from simply completing courses to considering the changes in their thinking or in their abilities and what they will continue to work on. They are asking themselves questions like those I pose to my students: What did I learn? What does it mean? And how will I use it?

Unfortunately, some students only discovered the value of self-evaluations after their third year when they completed the retrospective essay as part of their Division II portfolio. This is an example of their thoughts about the process:



I haven't really put a lot of effort into any of my self-evals, except for my Div II portfolio, which is sort of when I had my aha moment about why we do self-evals, because while thinking about all the different classes I've taken, and going through all the papers that I've written and stuff, I was just sort of amazed at how much I've grown since being at Hampshire, I didn't even realize it. And I think that's really important.

Reflection is a learned skill, and despite our discussion in classes, there were a variety of misconceptions from students who did not make good use of the narrative evaluation system. Some believed it served a logistic purpose of reminding their professors what they completed or how hard they worked. They thought their self-evaluations facilitated the faculty's writing of their narrative course evaluations.

I always saw the self-evaluations as more of a tool for faculty than for ourselves. I never really got what I was supposed to put in my self-evaluations...[My] self-evals were always sort of, "I think I did a pretty good job. I really probably could have done better here." They seemed more of a tool for faculty than they did for myself, cause I know what I did.

Others felt confused and unclear about the process and what they should produce:

I didn't know exactly what was expected of me in the self evals. Because I remember for the most part it had two sentences [that said], "Please describe your progress this semester in this course". Ok, in terms of what? What do you want me to specifically say? Do you want me to say how many times I was absent? Do you want to say how many pages I wrote the entire semester? What do you want from me? And so, I remember being very monotone and very mechanical about it whenever I wrote self evals. It was very much, "Yeah, I did a pretty good amount of work and, you know, I did all my papers on time and I met the deadlines and I may have missed a couple of classes, but overall I think I did pretty ok." It was very simple. I didn't really think I learned anything from it."

As a result of these studies, it seems clear that the ability to monitor and reflect on one's learning is an important factor in students' moving forward in such a learner-centered environment. We asked faculty to rank the students we interviewed in terms of their academic strengths and growth. When we crossed the students who did understand the importance of

self-evaluations against the faculty ratings, we found that the more self-reflective students tended to be those who best thrived at the College. For these students, course self-evaluations and divisional reflective essays facilitated their learning, personal and academic growth, and ability to chart their course of study.

Though correlational, this finding suggests that self-reflection has positive benefits on students' learning and their ability to set goals, and create effective educational pathways. Self-reflection is a core value and critical pedagogical practice of the College, but one that, before these interview studies, had been taken for granted at the College. There was a general sense that self-evaluation was important and an unexamined assumption that students would just naturally utilize the required self-reflection components as intended without being taught to do so.

We saw some of these same patterns when we asked students about the process of building an ePortfolio of their work at the end of their Division II concentration. Students varied in how well they curated their work and whether their reflective essays were more self-evaluative or descriptive. The retrospective essays that simply chronicled the story of their concentration mirrored the problems with more mechanical self-evaluations. As we change the supports and practices of ePortfolio production, we have seen more highly curated portfolios with much more thoughtful reflection. The following two quotes demonstrate the kind of experience many students have in looking back over four semesters of work:

On the ePortfolio building process:

As I looked back at my work in building my portfolio, I was really pleased to see how much I grew in my ability to write analytically. If I hadn't looked back at my work to see what it looked like early and later, I might not have realized the shift. Seeing it has helped me to think about improvement ... Now I am considering what my next step is. I know I can talk about my ideas.

From a transfer student:

Until I came to Hampshire and started to build my ePortfolio, I had no idea that there were themes that kept—that kind of drove my work and made it hang together in such a meaningful way. Building my ePortfolio has helped me understand what I am trying to do ... I can explain my work better. It is different than saying what I'm majoring in. It is about explaining what drives me—what my work is.

For these students, taking the time to look across their work and consider the ways they changed in their skills and understanding over two formative years was crucial in determining their next steps. Their ePortfolios are shared with their advisors, so have the potential to not only affect their learning, but also to put their advisors in a much stronger position to suggest new learning opportunities.

### PROGRAMMATIC CHANGE FROM FINDINGS

Our research led us to double down on teaching students the purposes and practices of self-evaluation, reflection, and ePortfolio production. We created a guide for students on the entire narrative evaluation system that includes the purposes for each component, examples, and prompts to guide reflection. And we developed new resources and programming to support students' development of their ePortfolios.

Just as we found that students varied in their writing of self-evaluations, it should come as no surprise that faculty also varied in their approach to writing narrative evaluations at the course and divisional level. Some faculty were writing narrative evaluations that described student work (e.g. what their papers were about, what theories they engaged) and were less evaluative of students relative to the aims of the course. Descriptive evaluations are less helpful to students in setting their next goals and tell outside stakeholders less about students' abilities. A team of faculty crafted a guide for faculty on writing effective narrative evaluations, sharing examples that articulate students' increasing sophistication relative to course goals. The faculty guide is highly specific to Hampshire's narrative evaluations and is not shared here. I discuss the student-facing supports below.

#### *Guide for Students on Using Self-evaluation and Narrative Evaluation*

Although many faculty had created handouts and instructions for students on writing their self-evaluations, the variation sometimes confused students. Using the same language across all courses could strengthen student understanding and practice. Over the summer of 2016, a group of faculty met, read many self-evaluations, and determined what students were discussing in the strongest self-evaluations. Using their own deep practice working with students and the findings from close reading, we crafted one unified document that we thought addressed the important

components of self-evaluation to share with all students. This guide is being made available to students and faculty through different avenues, such as through our Teaching and Learning Initiative, new faculty orientation materials, and through periodic emails to faculty for advising. It is also available to students through various blogs and through orientation materials.

The student guide discusses all aspects of our evaluation system from contracts, faculty narratives, student self-evaluation, ePortfolios, and reflective retrospective essays. Here, I simply share the introductory information for students about why they write self-evaluations, as it gives a sense of the kind rationale students have found useful.

### *Why Self-evaluations*

Doing self-evaluation is not simply reporting what you have done. It is reflecting on the meaning you are making of your learning; it is about taking stock of what you have done in the past, making sense of your current accomplishments, and then looking forward to create new goals and plans for the future in order to get the most out of your experiences. One can think of it as a series of four questions we ask ourselves: (1) What did I do? (2) What did I learn? (3) What does it mean/did it change how I think? And (4) how will I use it?

Doing a self-evaluation in a course helps put the course in the context of your overall educational plans (How does this learning affect my Divisional work? What do I still need to work on to be ready for the next Division?). Doing a reflective retrospective at the end of each Division helps you to look across a number of courses, to see patterns of growth, to see how your ideas have changed, and to set new goals.

Even if you are generally a reflective person and feel as though you have done enough reflecting and talking about your learning during the semester, the act of writing down your reflections is important. Doing so can spur new thoughts and ideas, help you notice patterns you didn't see before, and set goals and make plans in an explicit way. It creates a record for you to review and reflect on in the future.

### *ePortfolios: New Resources and Practices*

Hampshire students have been demonstrating their work in portfolios for over 50 years. They create portfolios at the end of both Division I and II that include a retrospective essay. Students report that portfolio production is important to their learning, but our traditional practice might not

have supported reflection as well as it could have. Until a few years ago, portfolios were largely done in hard copy—binders beginning with contracts, narrative evaluations, and then papers from courses. These binders lent themselves to chronological organization of paper products. But not all student work exists on paper, and the best reflection brings different pieces of work together that demonstrate growth in specific skills or understandings, which is unlikely to show up in a chronological display. Our ePortfolios seem to improve student reflection by allowing students to include a wide array of work and to arrange it in novel ways with reflection integrated into the portfolio on the pages where chosen work is displayed. The curation of work in an ePortfolio seems to improve reflection.

In the fall of 2016, Hampshire initiated its first ePortfolio pilot and today many of our students produce electronic portfolios. Knowing that reflective practices need to be taught (Springfield, 2001; Power, 2016), we created reflective prompts in a resource guide. The templates and the resources available to students have changed over time. Everything students need to understand the ePortfolio building process is available on an ever-evolving website, with templates, reflective prompts, and a sample ePortfolio at <https://sites.google.com/hampshire.edu/eportfolios>.

So far, many of the ePortfolios show deep engagement in reflective self-evaluation. Students report that they appreciated: (a) the ability to share a great deal of community engaged work with faculty that they were otherwise unsure how to document, (b) the ability to focus on the skills they developed and meaning they made from each of the traditional fields of study in their interdisciplinary concentrations, (c) the ability to share digital content, and (d) their ability to share their ePortfolios with potential employers, internship directors, and the like.

We still have work to do in developing the means by which students can share their ePortfolios in galleries and showcases for the Hampshire community. For now, they are shared with students' committees.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

The broader conversation about the effects of grading has begun. It is not going away any time soon. There is much to learn about creating learning-centered environments from the brave faculty across the country making change in their own classrooms and from institutions like Hampshire that have reflective self-evaluation and narrative evaluation at the core of their practices. All of our institutions, including Hampshire, can do better at

asking students to develop their own goals, make choices that move them forward, and monitor their own progress.

There are numerous ways to move away from the kinds of comparisons and stressors that grades engender. It would be wonderful if all institutions used narrative evaluations from faculty instead of grades, yet that is highly unlikely to happen—especially for institutions that have class sizes larger than 20–30 students simply due to their expense. But it is certainly impactful, and entirely possible, to shift the emphasis in any institution from grades to the metacognitive approach of asking students to self-evaluate and to build well-curated ePortfolios of their work with reflective writing and goal-setting. Doing so would result in a culture of centering student learning instead of the potentially cutthroat culture created by grading—one of competition for future resources created by the sorting of students. Of course, there is more to a true learner-centered environment than eschewing grades, though that has been a major focus of this chapter.

Educational institutions move at glacial speed when it comes to wholesale change. We hold onto outdated information about student learning and development and tend to reproduce the practices we experienced as students. Although making stepwise change is often a way to affect change at complex institutions, we often end up tweaking things around the edges and making claims of innovation. Or individual faculty and administrators try to implement new practices only to be met with resistance—after all, changing ingrained practices takes new understandings, planning time, and the discomfort of missteps and false starts.

By way of example, over 50% of Higher Ed institutions currently employ some type of ePortfolio system (Eynon & Gambino, 2017), but these are implemented for different purposes and with differential effects on students' integrative thinking and goal-setting, and so, on their agency. In some, students are asked to create a compilation of all their major works. In others, they are asked to select and showcase only their best work. In still others, they are asked to curate their work in order to demonstrate pivotal experiences, articulate the ways their thinking and skills have developed over time, and set new goals. There are different goals and learning outcomes associated with each of these practices. Yet, they all state that students create an ePortfolio of their work, and so, to an outsider without a critical take on educational practices they might all look the same. It requires careful attention and deep analysis to understand the distinctions in our practices. The same critical lens could lead us to question the ways in which any aspect of our teaching, including grades, is

actually serving students—teaching them the strategies required for success.

Changing something so fundamental to educational institutions as grading is extraordinarily difficult. It requires an understanding of the science of learning—a field of study not required for teaching or filling an administrative role in higher education. It also necessitates that we consider whether our practices really serve the mission of our institutions. Giving up on grades makes sense when institutions examine what is really happening at their institutions. We all say we value learning and want to graduate lifelong learners, but grading is part of a transactional approach to education. We need a transformative one if we want to educate individuals who can adapt to a changing world. In a transformative system, students and faculty work together to make meaning and consider new approaches to problems whereby all involved grow in their understanding. Faculty are not simply dispensing information and students are not given grades in response to how faithfully they can respond. Instead, the focus is on improvement and creating new directions for learning, as it is at Hampshire and other innovative institutions.

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# Innovating as an Embedded Program at a Larger State University: New College in Three Pivotal Moments

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## INTRODUCTION

Since its founding in 1971, New College at the University of Alabama (UA) has offered students an alternative option to traditional disciplinary degree options available at most colleges and universities. Working in close consultation with faculty, New College students design their own majors in Interdisciplinary Studies by integrating coursework from across the University and incorporating experiential learning in the form of independent studies and learning by contract. Two hallmarks of New College for the last 50 years have been the close relationships that develop between faculty and students in the creation of student-designed depth studies and the interdisciplinary, problem-based seminars taught by New College

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faculty. As a highly individualized option for self-motivated students, New College was founded on progressive principles of empowering students to shape their own learning and equipping them with the critical thinking, collaborative, and problem-solving skills necessary to address complex, real-world problems and to effect change. Unlike many of its counterparts housed at stand-alone, often private institutions, however, UA's New College is situated within a large, flagship R1 state university with its own traditions, mission, and goals. Given the changing landscape of higher education with a growing focus on standardization and accountability through comparative analytics and increasing research demands on faculty, is it possible for niche programs, such as New College, to remain innovative for more than 50 years? Can it be done within a conservative structure like a flagship state university?

In this chapter, we interrogate these questions by exploring three key moments in New College's history and argue that progressive programs like New College can sustain innovation and adapt to the evolving landscape of higher education while remaining true to their student-centered missions. Born out of conflict, tested both by consolidation into another unit and shifting approaches to revenue generation, New College's history highlights the tensions between institutional norms that seek to erase personalization and experimental, student-centered programs that value risk-taking and creative thinking. This case study provides evidence that the agility and resilience attributed to liberal arts education can apply to students, faculty, and programs alike. Further, the history of New College sheds light on some of the potential ways in which innovative programs can navigate the financial, structural, and political challenges facing many colleges and universities today. The lesson learned from New College's changing relationship with the larger university demonstrates how progressive educational models can survive, and in fact thrive, during a time of increasing political interference in higher education (Levenstein & Mittelstadt, 2022).

## MOMENT 1: NOT JUST ANOTHER HONORS PROGRAM (THE FOUNDING OF NEW COLLEGE)

The value of an origin story is that it does what bullet points cannot—it explains to those who follow the values that drove those who came before. But beginnings are frequently messy; and sometimes the goddess we learned emerged fully formed from her father's head has a significantly

more complicated backstory. This certainly is the case with UA's New College. What began as a project to create a university honors program encountered early opposition and ran afoul of institutional politics. A program that almost foundered before it began became "a small liberal arts college operating within a large multiversity."<sup>1</sup> Instead of an exclusive honors program used to recruit academically elite students, which was a common approach among some of New College's counterparts, UA created New College: an opportunity for students, with or without credentials of traditional academic success, to access innovative, student-directed learning at a large, public university.

Around 1967, UA President Dr. Frank Rose charged a committee to propose the creation of an honors program at UA.<sup>2</sup> But according to his successor, Dr. David Mathews, the University's committee on undergraduate education pushed back against that proposal. As Mathews explained, "the elitism inherent in honors programs was directly challenged in the discussions leading up to the New College."<sup>3</sup> Whether Mathews's retelling accurately captured the spirit of higher education at the time is not entirely clear, though. There appears to have been opposition to a university-wide honors initiative—but not just because elitism might be unfair to students.

Whatever the case, a new committee was formed in 1968 that proposed the program as an autonomous College that Mathews approved as UA's president in 1970 under the name "New College."<sup>4</sup> The thinking about whether this new unit should be an honors program changed over time. For example, initial documents describing the program specified that it would be for "exceptional and highly motivated students" who would be "superior."<sup>5</sup> Revisions to committee documents first soften "superior" to "serious," and then half-ask, half-state: "Perhaps [New College] should not be an honors college."<sup>6</sup> Documents outlining the mission of the

<sup>1</sup> In an unpublished personal letter to then New College Director, Dr. Natalie Adams, the President of UA at the time of New College's founding, Dr. David Mathews, described the origins of the program (Mathews, David. Unpublished personal letter to New College Director, Dr. Natalie Adams, September 13, 2013, p. 4).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>5</sup> Palmer, Steven C. *Strategies for Change and Innovation: New College*. Unpublished manuscript, February 28, 1975, pp. 15–17.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 17.

program eventually move the rhetorical needle further, declaring that New College “will not be an honors college.”<sup>7</sup>

As at least one researcher concluded, there does not appear to be a single reason New College moved away from an honors model; in fact, several likely existed.<sup>8</sup> For example, academic politics clearly contributed to this decision. First, it is clear the College of Arts & Sciences (CAS), UA’s only other liberal arts-based college, viewed New College as a threat and competitor. Further, faculty across its departments, and even in other UA colleges, feared New College would poach their star students.<sup>9</sup> Finally, New College was perceived as undermining an existing (but underfunded) honors program in CAS.<sup>10</sup> It is telling, then, that in the fall of 1970, the New College Advisory Board (constituted to prepare the program to commence operations in 1971) agreed to give \$4000 of the program’s initial budget to the Arts & Sciences Honors Program.<sup>11</sup> It is hard to interpret this gift (around \$30,000 in present-day dollars) as anything but a proverbial olive branch. As will become clear below, the shape that innovation in New College took required buy-in from other units at UA that were unsure what the creation of the program would mean to them.

Whether resistance to New College stemmed from trepidation about experimental pedagogy or from old-fashioned competition, New College made a series of calculated choices to satisfy those leery of the new program’s potential impact, according to long-time New College Dean, Bernard “Bernie” Sloan.<sup>12</sup> One such decision was to limit the size of New College to no more than 200 students within a university of some 13,000.<sup>13</sup> This size cap was meant to assuage fears of competition from New College. Another was to open the program to students across a range of academic abilities and backgrounds, a decision calculated to signal New College would not compete with honors programs or lure away high-achieving

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 19.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 20.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 19.

<sup>12</sup> In an unpublished essay, the Dean of New College, Dr. Bernard (Bernie) Sloan, described the program’s mission and activities in its first two decades (Sloan, Bernard J. *A Brief History of New College: The Early Developments Leading to Current Practices*, Unpublished manuscript, 1990).

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 1.

students.<sup>14</sup> A third was opening New College seminars to students across the University, rendering a service to students and fellow programs (admittedly while also filling seats).<sup>15</sup> But more was at work than merely placating opponents of the program. Fostering goodwill across colleges and departments at the start was important because New College students were (and still are) expected to take most of their classes outside of the program.<sup>16</sup> Further, many faculty in New College were (and still are) cross-appointed in other departments, primarily in CAS. New College's early choices assured that its approach would not create problems for others in the campus community.

Although these decisions were practical politically, they also enabled programmatic innovations. Sloan described these early choices about size and admissions as deliberate. He rather pointedly recounted that "New College did not want to be just another 'honors program.'"<sup>17</sup> According to Sloan, in addition to soothing anxieties in other units, limiting New College's size was necessary to allow faculty "adequate time to provide the kinds of advising necessary for a 'highly individualized' curriculum and to allow small classes in [their] seminars."<sup>18</sup> Further, holistic admissions procedures (e.g. eschewing minimum GPA or standardized test requirements, including current students in admission interviews that assessed, among other things, candidates' community engagement) were not just a means to fill slots in the program. Rather, they were designed to include "a broad cross section of ages, abilities, lifestyles, and ethnic origins" to ensure diversity in New College.<sup>19</sup>

Indeed, early materials for the program touted the diversity of the student body—not just in terms of race, but also class, gender, and present or intended occupation. As the program's 1975 catalog<sup>20</sup> stated, the program was interested in students who displayed a different sort of academic excellence:

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 1.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>20</sup> The "New College Catalog" was produced internally to provide current and prospective students with general information about the program and to summarize requirements for the degree. Copies of the catalog are archived in New College.

The New College is *not an honors college*. Instead, the program is designed to accommodate a wide variety of individuals who differ in ability, age, race, sex, professional and vocational interests, and previous levels of academic achievement. The most significant admissions factor is that a student manifest a *significant degree of motivation and intellectual independence*. (p. 8)

This emphasis on motivation rather than on outcomes appeared in some of the earliest written accounts of New College and continues to be an emphasis today.

Writing for a 1972 conference on innovation in education (only a year after New College began admitting students), then-dean Dr. Neal Berte explained this focus on motivation-based admissions in terms of adding perspectives absent from the classroom that more traditional metrics for academic achievement would exclude: “There are some students in the New College who would not have been admissible to other colleges of the University. Although they appeared motivated, they had not done well in traditional learning environments” (Berte, 1972, p. 16). Berte immediately recognized the potential for this approach to increase diversity, describing how one of the program’s African American students, despite not showing typical signs of academic success, was nonetheless, one of only three students from Alabama whose artwork was chosen for display at the Kennedy Center for Performing Arts (Berte, 1972, pp. 15–16). Berte makes a double (if not triple) point by including among the students described, “the first Black sheriff since [R]econstruction days in Greene County, Alabama, which is the third-poorest county in the nation, attends the New College on a part-time basis” (1972, p. 16). It is also notable that Berte described New College’s problem-based, contemporary issues-focused seminars as benefiting from the participation of stay-at-home mothers returning to college (1972, p. 16). And as Wenk argues in chapter “Empowering Students Through Evaluation: Over 50 Years Without Grades at Hampshire College” of this volume, building these seminars into New College created opportunities for meaningful interaction with professors for populations of students who would not typically have had access to faculty in these settings. Further, by reframing academic performance in terms of motivation rather than outcome, New College was building an educational environment where students from different races and classes, different academic abilities and experiences, as well those with different attitudes about professional or vocational goals, were welcome to pursue their individual visions of excellence.

Another of New College's innovations at UA was to challenge and expand conventional notions of a liberal arts education as a series of courses confined to the college classroom to education occurring beyond the walls of the academy. From its beginning, students in New College were encouraged to pursue internships and other non-traditional learning experiences on- and off-campus (Berte, 1972, pp. 18–19, 23–24). By embracing experiential learning, New College, like other liberal arts programs of its era, challenged students to translate the ideals of the liberal arts into the communities where they would live and work as college graduates. In the words of Dr. David Mathews, New College students “had the opportunity to see what they could do to bring about the societal changes they would like to see. They had to learn the skills of working with others to solve problems, not just on campus but in the larger community.”<sup>21</sup> This was part of the program's mission: to use seminars as spaces where students could bring their lived experiences to the learning process. As Dr. Berte described them, “seminars are focused on contemporary problems so as to allow the student to move from knowing to doing, from self-improvement to community betterment” (1972, p. 16). Like other experimental institutions of the era (e.g. Western Washington's Fairhaven College), New College offered students opportunities to put theory into practice.

These out-of-class learning efforts helped students achieve traditional liberal arts goals like better understanding “the relationships and interdependencies between ... bodies of knowledge” (Berte, 1972, p. 17). But out-of-class learning could also be used to decidedly more practical ends; New College students could use internships, apprenticeships, and even jobs to earn course credit. Hence, from its beginnings, New College differed somewhat from other liberal arts programs because of its emphasis on preparation for work. Throughout early catalog entries and discussions of New College's innovation, learning and understanding the realities of employment were highlighted. In fact, New College's inaugural dean did not view liberal arts and vocational education as incompatible or incongruent. For example, Dr. Berte expanded the traditional liberal arts notion of “bodies of knowledge” to include “those of a vocational nature” (1972, p. 17). New College recognized work as a body of knowledge in

<sup>21</sup> Mathews, David. Unpublished personal letter to New College Director, Dr. Natalie Adams, September 13, 2013, pp. 4–5.

conversation with traditionally academic bodies of knowledge like the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences.

This recognition of work as a way of knowing appears to have been formalized in New College's earliest days. The program's 1975 catalog included in its discussion of out-of-class learning for course credit that "Off-campus learning experiences ... are encouraged for all students," and goes on to state that "formal employment" is recognized for this purpose (p. 23). In this context, "employment" was construed broadly at first (albeit with an eye to post-collegiate careers). For example, it included opportunities to gain experience, skills, and knowledge relevant to an industry, or to test a student's "vocational interests" (p. 23). Examples given include apprenticing at a newspaper or working in a Head Start office. The program's catalog even included a mocked-up proposal for a project that incorporates shadowing urban and regional planning offices in Denmark and England (pp. 24–26). But tellingly, the document also used "formal employment" to mean "working in a commercial enterprise while earning financial compensation" (p. 27). Taken together with the fact that pre-professional credits from programs like Nursing, Business, or Engineering could comprise the majority of a student's individualized major<sup>22</sup>, New College's approach to work assumes additional significance. While innovative liberal arts programs like Warren Wilson College have long provided tuition credit and valuable employment experience in exchange for work, at the time of its founding, UA's New College went even further. Yes, work enhanced liberal education, but liberal education could also enhance work.

Just over 50 years later, New College maintains its somewhat fraught relationship to liberal arts education's traditional conceptions of academic merit. Presently, most students in the department are also members of UA's (non-degree granting) Honors College. For students like these, problem-focused interdisciplinary seminars and depth study courses are often supplemented by directed reading-style independent study projects or internships with nonprofits or businesses. But the program also maintains its commitment to a substantial percentage of students whose achievements do not fit traditional conceptions of academic merit, students who may seek college credit for paid (or pay-worthy) work to supplement vocation-specific depth studies. As Girouard describes of her experience at Marlboro College (chapter "[Webs of Connection and](#)

<sup>22</sup> Sloan, p. 7.



Moments of Friction: Dynamics of Ownership and Relationship Between Students and Faculty at a Small Innovative College” of this volume), all students, not just high achievers, benefit from increased ownership in their education. Together, these New College students, regardless of traditional metrics like GPA or standardized test scores, demonstrate qualities their forebears did: “evidence of potential to do excellent work, ... excellence ... defined more broadly than test scores.”<sup>23</sup>

In the end, whether the story of UA’s New College is that it resulted from a failed honors program, or that it was an improbable pocket of innovation inside an inherently conservative university structure, does not really matter. What is significant, however, is that New College “expand[ed] the standards for academic rigor,” making experimental, liberal arts-based education available both to high-achieving students and to those who would not be competitive for academically elite programs with similar pedagogies.<sup>24</sup> Further, New College’s core attributes created a culture of experimentation and adaptability among its faculty and students that still exists today, and that in retrospect, proved beneficial when responding to various threats and challenges over the program’s 50-year history.

## MOMENT 2: A CRITICAL PREMIERE PROGRAM (THE MERGER: NEW COLLEGE’S TUMULTUOUS YEAR)

On February 7, 1997, 40 New College students and alumni marched to the President’s office, chanting “The students must be heard! We don’t want to merge.” One student held a sign with the slogan “Walmart University (Watch for Falling Standards).” Another student told the *Crimson White*, the student newspaper, “I’ve never seen students get together like this since the ‘60s” (Brown, 1997b). The students were protesting the possible discontinuance of New College and its proposed merger into the College of Arts & Sciences (CAS). Given the initial resistance to New College’s founding, this proposed solution, particularly its relocation to the University’s only other liberal arts college, was ironic, and ultimately, its 25 years of operating as an autonomous college came to an end. Would New College survive the move? More importantly, how could it continue its mission to provide students with innovative,

<sup>23</sup>Mathews, David. Unpublished personal letter to New College Director, Dr. Natalie Adams, September 13, 2013, p. 3.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., p. 4.

experimental learning opportunities now that it must follow the policies, practices, and standards of the largest and most bureaucratic academic unit on campus?

The discontinuance of New College was a top-down decision initiated by a new President, Dr. Andrew Sorensen, and a new Provost, Dr. Nancy Barrett.<sup>25</sup> It was also a quickly implemented decision. First reported in the *Crimson White* on January 23, 1997, Barrett claimed that “The University’s financial concerns are not a factor in the decision” (Brown, 1997a). New College Dean Bernie Sloan expressed concern that vital components and key values of New College “would be lost” in a merger with a much larger College (Brown, 1997a). A week later, the provost met with New College faculty, students, and alumni to discuss the proposed merger and, ostensibly, listen to their concerns.<sup>26</sup> Then, in April 1997, Barrett submitted a memorandum to the president that began: “This is to recommend that the New College become a unit within the College of Arts & Sciences, effective July 1, 1997. The unit, which will be known as the New College Program, will have the status of a department in the College.”<sup>27</sup> She also proposed that New College’s External Degree program for adult students be moved to the College of Continuing Studies and its Computer-Based Honors program be moved to a “confederation of University Honors Program reporting to the Provost.”<sup>28</sup> New College’s fate was decided and implemented in less than six months.

UA’s Faculty Handbook cited two reasons to merge or discontinue a unit: lack of centrality to the institution’s mission and financial precedence for other units deemed more critical. Barrett and Sorensen never cited either for closing New College. Instead, they introduced new language to justify their decision: efficiency, coherence, and ironically, innovation.<sup>29</sup> According to them, New College was “top heavy” with a dean, four faculty, and 15 staff members for 111 residential and 515 distance students. The merger with CAS purportedly would reduce administrative costs and divert resources directly to students. The President’s decision was clearly

<sup>25</sup> Both began their tenures at UA in 1996.

<sup>26</sup> Ford, Randal. Unpublished personal letter to President Andrew Sorensen, February 18, 1997. A copy of this letter, along with numerous other letters, memoranda, and articles, are archived in New College (hereafter, New College archives).

<sup>27</sup> Unpublished memorandum from Provost Nancy Barrett. April 21, 1997 (New College archives).

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

in response to external pressure from then-Governor Fob James, who had recently instructed colleges and universities to tighten their budgets. Sorensen mentioned in his memorandum the “budgetary climate and the higher education funding cuts being championed by our governor” before noting that combining New College and CAS would “allow for economies of scale and the long-term reduction of administrative staff.”<sup>30</sup>

Barrett and Sorensen also argued that the move would create coherence across UA’s undergraduate programming. The CAS had recently received a \$7 million dollar gift to fund a liberal arts-based Undergraduate Initiative with a living-learning component.<sup>31</sup> In early conversations with New College faculty, Sorensen indicated that he would like to bring together under one umbrella New College, Computer-Based Honors, the Honors Program, and the new Undergraduate Initiative. Accordingly, in February 1997, New College faculty submitted a proposal laying out six different options for increasing efficiency and programmatic coherence by combining these programs under the banner of New College.”<sup>32</sup> The proposal leveraged New College’s long track record of “build[ing] bridges to all the colleges”<sup>33</sup> and argued that it was well-positioned to administer and house these undergraduate programs. Despite engaging upper-administration’s rationales of efficiency and coherence, New College’s proposal was rejected. For New College faculty, who long considered themselves mavericks, this was a clear indication that faculty governance and innovative problem solving, a heretofore tradition of New College, were not valued by upper administration.

Ironically, Barret used the language of innovation to justify her decision to merge New College into CAS: according to her, it was no longer a unique, innovative College. She wrote in the April 21, 1997, memorandum that during a programmatic review, an “external reviewer reported

<sup>30</sup>Sorensen, Andrew. Unpublished memorandum to the Board of Trustees, February 4, 1997 (New College archives).

<sup>31</sup>The Undergraduate Initiative became the Blount Undergraduate Initiative (named after the donors, Winton and Carolyn Blount) and began operating in 1999. It is now the Blount Scholars Program, which features a liberal arts minor with a living-learning community. New College and the Blount Scholars Program enjoy a close relationship today. Many students majoring in Interdisciplinary Studies in New College also pursue a minor through Blount. The programs also share several adjunct faculty and cross-list some seminars.

<sup>32</sup>New College faculty. Handout: *A College for the 21st Century: Options for the Future of New College*. February 11, 1997. (New College archives)

<sup>33</sup>Ibid.

that New College is not on the cutting edge of developments in its field today.”<sup>34</sup> Barrett then pivoted to the new Undergraduate Initiative, referring to it as “new and exciting” and providing “more interdisciplinary study and innovative teaching and learning opportunities for students and faculty.” Then, in what was interpreted as a searing criticism of New College and its faculty, she added, “some of the best and most thoughtful faculty in the University are involved in the Undergraduate Initiative, and the New College program could benefit enormously from being a part of this important undertaking.” Barrett’s dismissal of New College, its mission, and its faculty was seen as a direct affront to the program’s 25-year history, which galvanized New College faculty, students, and alumni.

From the first conversations with Barrett in January 1997 and throughout the spring semester, New College faculty, students, and alumni demonstrated their vehement opposition to the merger in every way possible. Working together, the New College community strategized, organized, and protested. In early February, they sent emails and letters to current students and parents and to alumni encouraging them to write to Sorensen, Barrett, and members of the Board of Trustees. Faculty developed and presented to various entities alternative options to the planned merger. They reached out to influential alumni to put pressure on the President to defer making any quick decisions regarding New College. They created talking points for themselves, their supporters, and other influential decision-makers. In one handout, they wrote: “the merger is intended to achieve an external goal (impact the Alabama Legislature and Governor) by making internal changes. All of the educational arguments for the merger are either very weak or fallacious, and the achievement of the external goal is arguable.”<sup>35</sup> On April 28, 1997, Sloan and the faculty met once again with Sorensen and implored him to defer acting on Barrett’s proposal.

Students and alumni responded to the faculty’s call to action and organized their own protests. At the February march on the steps of Rose Administration Building, Sorensen tried to placate the students with his explanation of the motives behind the merger. “I am not interested in eliminating New College,” he told the students (Brown, 1997b). He expressed frustration that the students were misconstruing his motives.

<sup>34</sup> Barrett memorandum. April 21, 1997 (New College archives).

<sup>35</sup> New College Faculty. Unpublished handout: *Talking Point for UA Senators*, undated, 1997 (New College archives).

“My passion is the quality of education we provide,” he told the protesters. “I’m trying to move the money from administration into teaching” (Brown, 1997b). The students questioned why the merger with CAS appeared to be the only option he was considering. They told Sorensen they felt their input was being disregarded. One student said of the merger, “It would be like freshwater fish being thrown into the ocean. New College extends the opportunity for an education to students that would not have a chance otherwise. It’s a separate college for a reason” (Brown, 1997b). After Sorensen met with the larger group, he invited seven students to join him in his office to discuss the proposal. He said to this group, “I find this massive resistance to innovation ironic” (Brown, 1997b).

In the first two weeks of February, Sorensen and Barrett received hundreds of letters and emails describing the uniqueness of New College, its long-lasting impact on students’ lives, and its importance to UA’s institutional reputation.<sup>36</sup> One New College memo reported that “we have received well over 1000 letters, emails, and phone calls in opposition to this merger.”<sup>37</sup> Judge Cleo Thomas, a UA graduate, frequent student in New College seminars, and an attorney in 1997, stated in his letter to Sorensen:

New College is not Arts & Sciences. Its emasculation is not a precondition for collaboration with Arts & Sciences. For us in Tuscaloosa, the monolithic is ever before us: the University we see. Where are the Colleges, one might ask? Pointing to New College has been a good answer. Do not eliminate the good answer.<sup>38</sup>

Students peppered the *Crimson White* and the local *Tuscaloosa News* with letters protesting the merger (e.g. Cross, 1997; Lewis, 1997a, 1997b). They pointed to its uniqueness (e.g. “the core curriculum includes dinner at the dean’s house”) and to the accomplishments of its students: “three Rhodes Scholar finalists and the current Vulcan Scholar” (Cross, 1997). They turned to television to air their concerns by raising funds to produce a 30-second commercial played on several cable channels. The commercial

<sup>36</sup>The New College archives house hundreds of these letters and emails (New College archives).

<sup>37</sup>New College faculty. Memorandum to all interested New College parties. Updated, 1997 (New College archives).

<sup>38</sup>Thomas, Jr., Cleophus. Personal letter to President Andrew Sorensen, February 5, 1997 (New College archives).



**Fig. 1** New College students designed a “Critical Premiere Program” logo to protest the proposed merger of New College into the College of Arts and Sciences (left). The original drawing is framed and on display in the New College Director’s office. An updated version was developed in honor of New College’s 50th Anniversary in 2021 (right). Reproduced from Critical Premiere Program by Mary Scott Hunter with permission from Mary Scott Hunter and from Critical Premiere Program, 50th Anniversary by Jamilah Cooper with permission from New College, University of Alabama, respectively

featured Nathan Ballard, a wheelchair-bound student with cerebral palsy, sharing his experiences in New College and then a black screen with the phone numbers of Governor James and President Sorenson.

In what has become New College lore, this outpouring of support was acknowledged by President Sorenson, who (perhaps with some embellishment) is credited with saying that he had never received as much “hate mail” as he did during this period, not even about the University’s much beloved football team<sup>39</sup>. He apparently went on to refer to New College as a “critical premiere program.” Not surprisingly, students quickly seized upon his reference as their slogan and designed buttons to protest the merger.<sup>40</sup> The student-designed draft of this logo is framed and housed in New College’s office (Fig. 1).

<sup>39</sup> Blewitt, Harry. Personal communication to New College Director, Dr. Julia A. Cherry, undated, 2019.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

Despite these heroic efforts, the semester-long fight to preserve New College as its own College failed when, on July 1, 1997, it was merged into CAS.<sup>41</sup> Dean Bernie Sloan retired. In his closing remarks at the New College commencement on May 17, 1997, he said:

Most in this room are aware that an important event will occur on July 1. On this date, a small, innovative, progressive and financially sound entity will be merged with a much larger entity which, historically, has been much less innovative, progressive, or financially sound ... So, let us wait and watch with great interest when on July 1, 1997, the British Crown Colony of Hong Kong is merged with the People's Republic of China ... Now the time has come for me to bid you adieu. *Pax Vobiscum*.<sup>42</sup>

While New College technically survived the merger, perhaps a better description is that the New College main-campus program was subsumed under CAS, and the External Degree distance program was moved, at least administratively, to the College of Continuing Studies.<sup>43</sup> As discussed in the next section, both programs had to adapt to the practices, policies, and culture of the colleges that subsumed them. Could New College as a department continue its identity as a unique, experimental unit committed to a student-centered, student-empowered approach to education? It was in this new context, but with a steadfast commitment to its founding principles, that New College entered its third phase of innovation and experimentation, one in which a new set of tensions arose as a program doubly embedded: nested within a college within the larger university.

<sup>41</sup> At the University of Alabama (a non-union university), the Faculty Senate is an advisory entity with little governing power. The Faculty Senate was nominally involved in the semester-long protest. They asked Provost Barrett to respond to several questions about the merger, which she ignored. They held a special meeting on April 29, 1997, to discuss the merger and passed a resolution that the merger should not go forward because the Provost failed to provide “credible support for the merger according to the Faculty Handbook.” The Provost’s memorandum to President Sorensen clearly states that she had fulfilled her obligations to the Senate by informing them of her proposal and allowing them to offer feedback.

<sup>42</sup> Sloan, Bernard J. Unpublished closing remarks at the New College Commencement ceremony, May 17, 1997 (New College archives).

<sup>43</sup> At the time of the merger, administration of the External Degree Program was moved into the College of Continuing Studies, which was converted from a College into the Office of Teaching Innovation and Digital Education in 2022. Academically, the program remained with New College in the College of Arts & Sciences. In 2011, the External Degree Program was renamed as New College LifeTrack.

**MOMENT 3: “DON’T HAVE THE MAJOR YOU WANT?  
WE HAVE A PROGRAM WHERE YOU CAN DESIGN YOUR  
OWN” (WHEN GOALS CLASH: BALANCING DEMANDS  
FOR GROWTH IN A SMALL LIBERAL ARTS PROGRAM)**

At the start of the 1997–1998 academic year, New College had officially entered a new and uncertain phase of its existence. It was now a department embedded within CAS at a large state institution. Insulated as such, it benefitted from the resources and political protection that the University provided, but it also existed in tension with the inherently conservative and hierarchical models—both of governance and of discipline-bound, academic structures—of the College and the University. While much about the program’s administrative structure had changed, other aspects of the program persisted much as they had before the merger. Nevertheless, the legacies of New College’s origin story and the recent turmoil of the merger loomed large, creating a new sort of tension. This tension was perhaps most evident during, and immediately following, the Great Recession of 2007–2009 when the University experienced unprecedented growth in undergraduate enrollment. During this enrollment surge, departmental productivity increasingly was measured by revenue-associated metrics, like number of majors, student credit-hour production, and grant funding. These new outcome-based metrics did not always align well with New College’s approach to individualized, student-centered undergraduate education.

In 2002, President Sorensen left the University, and after a one-year interim, the University welcomed Dr. Robert Witt as its new President (Andreen, 2003). His tenure began following the economic downturn of 2001–2003, during which time many state legislatures, including Alabama’s, cut funding to public colleges and universities (Hebel et al., 2002). With a new President, faculty across the University were nervous that budget cuts were forthcoming; and once again, New College found itself in a potentially vulnerable position. Rather than make cuts, however, Witt’s solution was one of growth—specifically to increase undergraduate enrollment and tuition revenue (Smith, 2012). Witt doubled down on this strategy during and after the Great Recession of 2007–2009, focusing on continued growth, particularly among out-of-state students (Smith, 2012). While other institutions braced for more cuts and reductions in enrollment (Wright, 2009), Witt continued to recruit at a record pace to survive the recession and state



budget cuts without cutting faculty and staff positions (Jones, 2010). The aggressive recruitment strategy was successful. From 2005 to 2015, UA's enrollment increased from 21,835 to 37,100 students. As an intentionally small program that prioritized highly individualized teaching and advising, New College faced the challenge of demonstrating its value in this new model without being able to grow in size. As became increasingly evident, however, innovation and individualization were key tools to promote the program to the College, upper administration, and the growing study body. Further, New College's responses to these challenges were firmly grounded in its student-centered, experimental mission, underscoring Warren's argument in chapter "When Innovative Institutions Fail: Quest University, Partnerships, Financial Sustainability" of this volume that progressive programs can change and continue to innovate without abandoning their mission. With experimentation and individualization at the center of its mission, New College was well-positioned to adjust to the structural changes from the merger and the pressures arising from the University's rapid growth and changing metrics for evaluating success.

Administratively, the most visible difference in New College's structure was at the top. The "dean" was replaced by the "director," who reports to the Dean of CAS. In practice, the director functions as a department chair with the same roles, responsibilities, and duties as all other chairs in the College. Immediately following the merger, an interim director from CAS served as director for six years until Dr. James Hall was appointed director in 2003. He served in that capacity until 2012, matching Witt's time at UA almost exactly. The challenges Dr. Hall faced, as well as the two Directors since him, centered on balancing the program's student-centered mission to provide innovative interdisciplinary education with new and changing demands within the rapidly growing and increasingly research-focused University landscape.

This focus on revenue-based metrics created new challenges for smaller departments like New College. In some ways, the enrollment cap that limited the program's majors to facilitate highly individualized advising and small seminars became a liability. The allocation of university resources, including new faculty lines, increasingly was tied to student credit-hour production. Under Dr. Hall's supervision, New College launched a new, large-enrollment survey course on the fine arts that increased the department's overall credit-hour production and satisfied a general education requirement that all UA students must meet to graduate. To attract more students, many New College seminars were designated as general

education or University Honors courses, a trend that continues today. This approach also benefited New College majors, as one New College seminar could satisfy up to four requirements (general education, University Honors, New College seminar, depth study).

The flexibility of the New College major provided another advantage in demonstrating the program's value to the University, particularly with student recruitment. The University would call on New College when prospective students expressed an interest in a major that was not otherwise offered on campus. In fact, New College increasingly was featured in recruiting materials and during campus tours—"Don't have the major you want? Well, we have a program where you can design your own." As a result, the number of New College majors remained relatively steady during this period when other liberal arts and humanities programs were experiencing declines (Hu, 2017; American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2021). Consequently, these approaches to managing the post-merger and recession years meant that New College simultaneously demonstrated its alignment with the University's strategic goals while also protecting, and remaining true to, the experiential, interdisciplinary seminar-based learning that the program had valued since its inception. In this way, New College's long-term commitment to individualized, student-centered education became more broadly recognized by the University as an innovation worth sustaining, despite the program's small size.

While New College's approach to teaching and advising may not have changed much for faculty, new realities for research productivity emerged as the College and University increasingly evaluated performance on metrics that were not as highly prioritized prior to the merger. In fact, the merger created a very different culture for faculty and significantly changed hiring practices, with more emphasis placed on research productivity (and grant revenue) than ever before. From its inception, New College focused on innovative teaching and pedagogy and on serving students. Faculty routinely introduce new interdisciplinary seminars, work closely with students on projects, like building solar cars (Levinson, 1989), creating erosion control and creek access structures (Mitchell, 2007), hosting a girls media camp,<sup>44</sup> and overseeing independent learning experiences for credit. While

<sup>44</sup>The Druid City Girls Media program, directed by New College Associate Professor, Dr. Barbara Brickman, emerged from a New College seminar on girls' culture. Students in the class helped generate programming for a summer camp for young girls interested in learning more about filmmaking (<https://druidcitygirlsmedia.org>).

these student-centered activities remain an important component of New College's criteria for tenure and promotion, faculty have had to prioritize scholarly research to meet requirements for retention, tenure, and promotion in New College, their cross-appointed departments, and the College. In many cases, both New College faculty, as well as faculty from the joint department, reviewed and evaluated progress towards tenure and promotion. As expectations about research grew for all faculty on campus, New College faculty, in particular, found themselves negotiating the continued expectation of heavy advising and teaching loads with the reality that research and scholarly output would ultimately decide their future.

Despite the changing landscape, New College faculty flourished in the post-merger era and during the Witt years generally. Immediately following the merger, and in part to placate concerns about New College's demise, Provost Barrett granted two new entry-level faculty positions, and in 1998, three tenure-track faculty (still with us today) joined the newly revamped New College as Assistant Professors. Then, between 2006 and 2012, New College hired another six tenure-track faculty into new lines or to replace retiring faculty. At the conclusion of Witt's and Hall's tenures, New College supported 11 full-time faculty compared to only four in 1997, the opposite of the "economies of scale" that Sorenson and Barrett envisioned. In many regards, this growth represented a victory for the program, but the loss of autonomy in defining the expectations for tenure and promotion significantly changed how these professors were hired and evaluated.

Because of its expectation for strong performance in both teaching and research, New College had to hire a rare type of faculty who could balance the program's emphases with new ones expected by the College. Advertisements for new positions continued to emphasize New College's values of student-centered teaching and advising, as well as its focus on interdisciplinarity and innovation in both teaching and research. However, recruitment now emphasized the need for research productivity consistent with the tenure and promotion expectations in potential partner departments and the College. Thus, search committees included representatives from potential partner departments and prioritized research foci that could strengthen or complement existing research areas on campus. And, while New College faculty maintained a 45% teaching, 35% research, and 20% service full time equivalent (FTE) distribution (compared to the CAS's typical 40%, 40%, 20% split), retention and promotion under this new model were ultimately predicated on faculty research and creative

activity, rather than on excellent teaching, experimental pedagogy, and developing close relationships with students. Because the commitment to New College's values was so strong among its faculty, the department's tenure and promotion guidelines continued to emphasize commitment to students and to interdisciplinarity in both teaching and research in ways that did not detract from the increasing focus on research productivity. In many ways, the program's history of innovation in teaching led to innovation in research and provided faculty with opportunities to enhance their scholarship through their teaching, and vice versa. For example, a recent book by a New College professor integrated original scholarship with student insights collected while teaching courses on gender and sexuality (Roach, 2022). New College's track record of faculty success under this new model is quite strong, with high retention, tenure, and promotion rates among its faculty, as well as multiple college, university, and external recognitions for teaching and research.<sup>45</sup> Because New College faculty successfully rose to meet the challenges of the time, the changes that occurred after the merger into CAS had minimal impact on the student experience.

In most regards, the experience for New College students remained the same after the merger. They continued crafting individualized, interdisciplinary majors as they always had, in large part because the program's faculty focused their attention on maintaining the integrity and uniqueness of its program. For example, the admissions process has remained largely as it has been since 1971: a prospective student submits a self-statement and is interviewed by faculty and students who make recommendations about admission. The interdisciplinary seminars at the heart of New College's curriculum continue as small, discussion-based, problem-centered, four-credit-hour courses.<sup>46</sup> New College students continue to work closely with their New College faculty advisors to create highly

<sup>45</sup> Over the past 20 years, all New College faculty who have applied for tenure or promotion have been successful, with two leaving their positions prior to being eligible to apply for tenure and promotion. Further, New College faculty have received seven Distinguished Teaching Fellowships from the CAS, one Outstanding Commitment to Teaching Award from the University's Alumni Association, two Outstanding Commitment to Student Awards from the CAS, four of the top research awards from the CAS and the University, two Southeastern Conference Faculty Achievement Awards, and six Fulbright Awards, among numerous other residencies and awards.

<sup>46</sup> The norm at UA has always been three credit-hour courses, except for science classes that have a mandatory lab.

individualized self-designed majors (e.g. arts entrepreneurship, nonprofit management, global health, sports analytics) that incorporate University-wide coursework. Experiential learning through independent learning contracts is still available to students, and include opportunities to earn course credit for internships, creative practice, scholarly research, and vocational or skills-based practice. In this regard, many rightly argue that the merger did not result in a significantly different student experience, nor did predictions about its elimination actualize. This positive outcome for New College students is largely the result of the hard behind-the-scenes work of the New College directors, faculty, and staff, who remained steadfastly devoted to the students and sought creative ways to deliver innovative learning opportunities despite lingering fears of New College's fit within increasingly revenue-driven conceptions of university education.

## CONCLUSIONS

The lessons learned from New College's origin story, its tumultuous transition from a college to department, and the subsequent adjustments to operating within CAS point to the importance of faculty and students being highly invested in their undergraduate program—its mission, curriculum, and culture. While New College continues to feel vulnerable as a small, high-touch program within a larger, revenue-driven institution, the story of New College is, in many ways, one of persistence and resilience despite these perceived threats. New College's ability to respond to challenges is largely attributable, perhaps paradoxically, to remaining constant in its commitment to experimental and student-centered education. That its mission is situated within the liberal arts tradition, one that has informed higher education since the Middle Ages, underscores the idea that the old can be new again. Thus, New College's constancy in its mission has provided the necessary framework to not only weather the storms of the past 50 years, but to successfully experiment and innovate for the benefit of current and future students.

Even now, New College's ability to bridge both traditional and progressive modes of education allows it to respond to, and often serve as a model for, new initiatives implemented at the college or university levels. As an experimental unit with a long tradition of civic engagement and experiential learning options, New College has been ahead of the curve when it comes to university initiatives to promote community outreach, service learning, or other community-based learning opportunities. For

example, New College was a valuable resource when the College and University launched its own larger-scale efforts to enhance undergraduate research, internships, and other experiential learning opportunities. Similarly, New College's curriculum, which has consistently engaged contemporary issues of social and environmental justice and promoted diversity, equity, and inclusion, is well-positioned to serve as a model on how to incorporate justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion into the university's proposed changes to the core curriculum. In these ways, New College's commitment to its mission—to be an experimental unit that provides its students with highly individualized and innovative education—has been the hallmark of its brand of progressive education. By being true to its values, New College has been both innovative and highly adaptable to the changing landscape of the larger university over its 50-plus year history. If past is prologue, New College's story suggests that progressive programs can survive, and even thrive, by remaining true to their missions, which allow for change and growth through innovation.

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# *El Colegio Chicano Del Pueblo: Decolonizing Chicano Education and the Search for Self-Determination*

*Jerry Garcia and Ernesto Mireles*

Colegio Chicano del Pueblo (Chicano People College) launched on September 16, 2020. The program was originally conceived as an asynchronous education project by Drs. Jerry Garcia and Ernesto Mireles. The Colegio and courses grew out of conversations that had begun directly before and immediately after the world's education system went online after the outbreak of the Covid-19 virus in March 2020 and eventual pandemic later the same year. Both of us had been teaching Chicano Studies since the early 2000s and understood that part of the working-class community was unable to afford attending university for two primary reasons.

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First, a significant portion of working-class individuals simply cannot afford to attend university, and second, because of their economic status, many cannot afford to take time off from work, which means lost wages, even for a few hours. Thus, a significant part of the community CCP attempted to reach is shackled by economic necessity to put food on the table, first, with education a secondary consideration. The development and launch of CCP emerged in fall 2020 to address these concerns. Just as important was the understanding that Chicana/o Studies was created with this constituency in mind to empower the Chicano working-class to make impactful structural change in their daily lives.

There have been numerous attempts since the 1960s by groups and organizations to create stand-alone independent Black, Tribal, and Chicano educational systems to include primary–secondary education, as well as colleges and universities. Three of the most well-known entities from the Chicano community include *Escuela Tlatelolco* founded by the Crusade for Justice in Denver, Colorado, *Colegio Cesar Chavez* in Mt. Angel, Oregon, and *Colegio Jacinto Trevino* originally out of Mercedes, Texas. These are a handful of the many entities that attempted to challenge the status quo regarding K-12 and beyond education for Chicanos. This essay will provide a brief overview of the Chicano educational experience since their forced incorporation following the US invasion and conquest of Mexico's northern territories in the early to mid-nineteenth century. Following this historical overview, we examine, briefly, a few independent Chicano educational institutions in K-12, college, and university levels that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s. This will provide the reader some context how the Chicano Movement of the 1960s and 1970s inspired educational reform and the impetus for these independent entities.

It is important to understand that long before the advent of the 1960s–1970s Chicano Movement, that parents, organizations, and students had been addressing the educational inequality of Mexican students in the United States since the nineteenth century. During these earlier periods, the most obvious form of inequality was the segregation of students of Mexican ancestry. This practice, like those of African Americans, Native Americans, and Asians, was not only rampant and widespread throughout the US Southwest and Midwest, but one of the many barriers faced by students of Mexican ancestry that made it difficult, if not impossible, to achieve educational parity with the white students. It is this arena that the Mexican American community begins to protest and mobilize against this egregious form of discrimination.

THE MEXICAN AMERICAN MOVEMENT, 1900–1950:  
EDUCATION, SEGREGATION,  
AND COMMUNITY MOBILIZATION

Desegregation, educational reform, and general civil rights are often seen from the perspective of the post-World War II period. Although space-constraints have limited our discussion to educational issues prior to the 1950s, the Mexican American community through the first half of the twentieth century were engaged with numerous issues that severely impacted their communities above and beyond educational equality. Certainly, educational reform and desegregation were top priorities for the Mexican American community, but so were issues revolving around labor such as the dual-wage system, racism and discrimination in the workplace, and Mexican American women either were prohibited from working in certain industries or paid a lower wage based on their gender. History records a robust labor movement during the first half of the twentieth century with Mexican Americans demanding reform, seeking economic, social, and political justice. Due to these efforts, we have coined the first half of the twentieth century as the Mexican American Movement. In general, much what was achieved in the 1960s and 1970s Chicano Movement can be traced to these earlier efforts. Indeed, the efforts by the Mexican American community from 1900 to 1950 bear all the markers of the movement from the 1960s.

According to the 1900 US Census, there were roughly 500,000 individuals of Spanish-speaking ancestry in five designated states of the Southwest, Texas (1845) \*California (1850), Arizona (1912), New Mexico (1912), and Colorado (1876) in what had been Mexico's northern territory (Reynolds, 1933).<sup>1</sup> By 1930, the Mexican population in the same area had reached over 13 million. Many areas of the Southwest remained heavily Mexican in population, but the area's culture and customs had been supplanted by a dominant European American system at all levels that valued white supremacy and the near subordination of communities of color, especially Mexicans, African Americans, and Native Americans.

Many scholars from the fields of education and history have concluded that early twentieth century Mexican American education consisted of a program known as Americanization for both children and adults. The

<sup>1</sup>The \* designates the year each became a state.

prime objective of such programs was to maintain the political and economic subordination of the Mexican community. As Gilbert G. Gonzalez has illustrated:

In the first half of the twentieth century, when the Mexican community was more rural, separate, and identifiable than it is today, the schooling system constructed a cultural demarcation between a superior and an inferior culture. Assimilation, then, involved not just the elimination of linguistic and cultural differences, but of an entire culture that assimilation advocates deemed undesirable. (Gonzales, 1997, p. 158, 163)

Even those Mexican Americans that did assimilate, their education was thwarted by racism and discrimination. Yet, this is one of the many contradictions and conundrums that faced the Mexican American community for, on the one hand, the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo conferred US citizenship and simultaneously the concept of whiteness on those Mexicans considered white and living in the conquered territories, but on the other, Mexicans seen as dark skinned and those who were Black remained under indentured servitude or enslavement.<sup>2</sup> Thus, according to Martha Menchaca (1999, p. 19), began the racialization process for people of Mexican ancestry in the United States. Most important, the Mexican American population witnessed the gradual erosion of their rights under the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo with their civil rights violated well into the twentieth century, with some arguing it continues into the contemporary period.

To illustrate the resistance against school segregation emanating from the Mexican American community, we begin with what is considered one of the earliest, if not the first, desegregation cases in the United States, *Francisco Maestas et al. v. George H. Shore et al.* (1914). This case was filed against the Alamosa School District Superintendent and Board of Education 1913 in Alamosa, Colorado. One of the distinctive hallmarks of this case is the deliberate strategy by the Mexican families to deny their official standing as White and to argue that the Colorado Constitution forbade the separation of school children based on color or race (Donato

<sup>2</sup>Based on the 1790 US Naturalization Law, only free whites could become US citizens. Thus, the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo conferred “whiteness” on the Mexican population and well into the twentieth century the Mexican population struggled with this designation as well as faced challenges from whites who attempted to redefine Mexicans as Indians and in this manner, remove their citizenship.

& Hanson, 2021, p. 17). This is an important distinction since the two cases that will succeed *Francisco Maestas et al. v. George H. Shore et al.*, namely, *Del Rio ISD v. Salvatierra* (Texas 1930) and *Alvarez v. Lemon Grove* (California 1931), each used, in some fashion, the idea of whiteness regarding the Mexican community in their respective locations, therefore arguing that because of their whiteness, Mexican school children could not be segregated (Donato & Hanson, 2021, pp. 15–17). According to Donato and Hanson, *Francisco Maestas et al. v. George H. Shore* argued, “...that Mexican American were racially distinct, and used the Colorado Constitution to challenge segregation” (2021, p. 17).

It should also be understood that many schools that segregated Mexican American school children from white children used language as a basis for segregation arguing that the Mexican American children did not speak English or speak it well enough to be in the same school as white monolingual English speakers. By separating the Mexican children from whites, argued school officials, alleviated the possibility of delaying the scholastic achievement of white students. However, many of the cases that went to court in the first half of the twentieth century showed that nearly all the Mexican American school children spoke English and that language was used as an excuse and disguise for racial segregation.

When Mexican families appealed to all levels of Colorado state government and were denied help, the families organized, boycotted the school, and filed a lawsuit. This case further illustrates the tactics used by school boards and districts throughout the Southwest and California, who were somewhat familiar with the “racial” categorization of Mexican Americans and understood that race alone would not be sufficient to separate Mexican children. Thus, in desegregation cases from California, Colorado, Arizona, and Texas, language and scholastic achievement became the common denominator when Mexican American school children were segregated. In *Francisco Maestas et al. v. George H. Shore et al.*, the judge ruled in favor of the Mexican American families basing his decision primarily by rejecting the School’s argument that Mexican children were deficient with the English language.

This case is not well known within and without the field of Chicana/o Studies, but should be remembered in the same light as the 1931 case *Alvarez v. Lemon Grove*. With the Lemon Grove case, the presiding Judge also ruled in favor of the Mexican families but used their “whiteness” as a form of protection from segregation and determined that the Mexican American school children needed the forces of assimilation they received

from “American” school children to fit in and understand the American way of life. Although desegregation was ordered in the case of *Alvarez v. Lemon Grove*, it was of limited value because it remained a local decision confined to the Lemon Grove School District, amplified the whiteness of Mexicans, thus, making Mexicans culpable with white privilege, and most important, ignored the 14th Amendment of the Constitution of the United States, which at this point in history had not been used to challenge *Plessy v. Ferguson*.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, *Francisco Maestas et al. v. George H. Shore et al. and Alvarez v. Lemon Grove* illustrate the resistance to oppression and the importance of community mobilization of the Mexican community during the early twentieth century.

By the 1940s, the segregation of Mexican school children was widespread throughout the Southwest, California, Kansas, and even in non-traditional locations such as Arkansas. According to the US Census, the population of Latinos in the US during this period was approximately two million. Before moving on to the second half of the twentieth century, one other desegregation case warrants a brief discussion from the 1940s. Like the earlier cases discussed, *Mendez v. Westminster* (1946) from California, school districts used similar methodology to segregate Mexican children, namely, the lack of English proficiency in the classroom and were considered intellectually inferior to white children. However, the *Mendez* case diverted dramatically from previous cases in that it used the US Constitution, specifically the 14th Amendment, stating that the segregation of Mexican children was in violation of the Constitution, specifically, the equal access clause. The following is the general complaint submitted by the plaintiffs,

The complaint grounded upon the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution of the United States...allege a concerted policy and design of class discrimination against persons of Mexican or Latin descent or extraction of elementary school age by the defendant school agencies...resulting in the

<sup>3</sup>The 1896 Separate but Equal Law, *Plessy v. Ferguson*, was overturned in a 1954 US Supreme Court decision stating “Segregation of white and Negro children in the public schools of a State solely on the basis of race, pursuant to state laws permitting or requiring such segregation, denies to Negro children the equal protection of the laws guaranteed by the Fourteenth Amendment—even though the physical facilities and other ‘tangible’ factors of white and Negro schools may be equal.” <https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/brown-v-board-of-education#:~:text=On%20May%201954%2C%20U.S.,amendment%20and%20was%20therefore%20unconstitutional>. Accessed March 14, 2023.

denial of the equal protection of the laws to such class of persons among which are the petitioning school children. (Sanchez, 1951, p. 10)

The use of the Fourteenth Amendment by the Mexican American families marked a major turning point regarding strategy and legal approach. Although the 1914 Alamosa, Colorado case attempted to diverge from the perspective of whiteness, it was still grounded in racial theory by trying to make the case that Mexicans were a distinct race, thereby, not included with the non-white category. An examination of the various cases that emerged before Mendez, indicates that Mexicans and Mexican children were categorized from various perspectives regarding their “racial” designation, from whiteness to color to somewhere in between. In some instances, Mexicans attended school with white children and in other cases, they were segregated into different schools. Thus, the approach in *Mendez v. Westminster* jettisoned the idea of whiteness in favor of an approach arguing that the constitutional rights of Mexican American children were in violation by their segregation, and not because of their so-called whiteness, but rather, the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. The judge presiding over the case agreed with the families and their lawyers, stating:

We conclude by holding that the allegations of the complaint have been established sufficiently to justify injunctive relief against all defendants, restraining further discriminatory practices against the pupils of Mexican descent in the public schools of defendant school districts. (Sanchez, 1951)

As George I. Sanchez (1951) stated, “The school systems involved in the Mendez case appealed this decision of the United States District Court to the Ninth U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in San Francisco.” The appeal was heard on April 14, 1947, with the court unanimously affirming the decision of the District Court and bringing an end to legal segregation in California. With this victory, the courts began to address the larger issue of segregation at the national level. Indeed, the *Mendez* case remains one of the major contributions Chicanos have made to the dismantling of segregation throughout the US and as Gilbert Gonzalez notes, “probably...the first stage in the process of overturning the *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) doctrine of ‘separate but equal’ (as cited in Ramos, 2007). Very few outside Chicano scholars understand the importance of these early cases and the role they played in moving the needle forward toward a

more equitable United States. The emergence of the 1960s brought additional change throughout US society and notably, the Chicano/a community.

### THE CHICANO MOVEMENT: THE CONTINUED QUEST FOR EDUCATIONAL EQUALITY AND SELF-DETERMINATION

*The Chicano Movement is a race struggle that is starving for Freedom to live Free—to control the conditions around us. So far, we have begged, protested, and have demanded our rights, and the Anglo establishment refuses to listen. Because of this, we now know that we will never be free until we free ourselves. And we will never have control of our barrios, until WE TAKE CONTROL.* (David Sanchez, Prime Minister, Brown Berets (Sanchez))

“We Will Never Be Free Until We Free Ourselves.” A powerful and insightful statement by Brown Berets co-founder David Sanchez and reminiscent of Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968) where Freire argues the oppressed must free themselves or they too, will become an oppressor. As the second half of the twentieth century emerged, the Mexican American community faced many challenges with education reform central to their goals, but in the end, also altering the identity and history of the community. The 1950 US census counted nearly 3.2 million Spanish-speaking individuals in five southwestern states. Perhaps the most distinguishing difference between Mexican American Movement and Chicano Movement is the coalescing of various groups in the 1960s that pushed a national agenda whether that be for farm workers led by the United Farm Workers, education and civil rights with the Crusade for Justice, political reform in the vein of La Raza Unida Party, a national student movement and access to education at all levels represented by the student walkouts, the National Youth Liberation Conference and the Plan de Santa Barbara. Historically, both periods, the earlier Mexican American Movement, and the 1960s Chicano Movement, share a collective experience and memory of racism, exploitation, but also continued insertion, as marginalized people, into the dominant mainstream structure of the US. The commonalities between the two periods were clear. People of Mexican ancestry remained “disenfranchised, poor, badly educated, and excluded from the national dialogue” (Vargas, 2011, p. 335). Further, the two periods shared a common cultural thread that helped to bridge the two periods. These cultural threads included language, religiosity, music,

art, and numerous other manifestations of customs and traditions. This section on Chicano Movement, will primarily focus on educational issues, but, when necessary, will address broader concerns of the Chicano community.

The 1960s was a complex watershed decade and for many, a defining moment with hope and despair battling it out for the hearts and minds of Chicanas/os. The US Census counted roughly 5.8 million individuals of Spanish-speaking ancestry in the US. Many agree that what transpired in the 1960s within the Chicano community, was only possible because of the previous decades and this rings true for the Chicano Movement. Like many people in the 1960s, a significant portion of the Chicano community were enamored with the Kennedys because of youth, hope, and cultural traits they shared with the community such as immigrant background, Catholicism, and Jacqueline Kennedy's ability to connect via her linguistic abilities with Spanish. With the assassination of John F. Kennedy in 1963, the torch was passed to Lyndon B. Johnson, who introduced the "war on poverty" programs via his vision known as the Great Society whereby poverty was to be eliminated. The founding of the National Farm Workers Association in 1962 by Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta brought hope to farm laborers and sparked other movements throughout Chicano communities. However, the US's involvement and escalation in Vietnam shifted priorities away from the war on poverty of programs to funding the war in Vietnam.

Simultaneously, Chicanos experienced high levels of despair for a variety of reasons. One was the escalation of the Vietnam War and the high numbers of Chicanos conscripted for that conflict. Since the average educational attainment for Chicanos in the 1960s was eight years of schooling, most did not qualify for college, which in turn meant that the overwhelming number of Chicanos did not benefit from a college education and deferments from conscription. As a result, the devastation to the Chicano community is apparent via the casualty rate which reached nearly 20%, while Chicanos represented approximately 6% of the US population. The 1970 US Census put the Spanish-speaking population at nine million. Yet, under these conditions, the Chicano community found itself at the proverbial crossroads, to maintain the status quo, except minor concessions meted out by the white dominant system, or embark on a radical course correction that had been 120 years in the making. Many Chicanas/os chose the latter and we have an abundance of historical documents that sheds light on this course correction and radical change espoused by the



1960s Chicano generation. For example, in a document titled “Los Chicanos: Toward a New Humanism,” Eliu Carranza, speaks of a decades-long struggle for the Chicano community seeking change to survive beyond its current state that included racism, dehumanization, and general unequal treatment throughout US society. Simultaneously the author speaks of a new destiny and humanism for Chicanos that can be achieved via the following path:

...the decolonization and liberation of the Mexican American mind by an examination of our relation to our history, tradition, and culture. (Carranza, c. 1969)

The establishment of free universities, Chicano Institutes, and autonomous Schools of Mexican American Studies to research, articulate, publish and disseminate knowledge of Mexican American culture and traditions.... (Carranza, c. 1969)

In this manner, the Chicano generation articulated a new direction for the community that differentiated itself from previous generations. Based on these concepts, Chicano liberation could only be achieved by breaking away from mainstream concepts of education and the adoption of a Chicano-centered curriculum in addition to seeking out alternative institutions. These alternatives will be discussed later in this article, but the Chicano generation took a multiprong approach toward education reform and change.

As the second half of the twentieth century grinded its way into the early 1970s, educational equality and general civil rights for Chicanos remained elusive and out of touch with civil rights legislation passed in the 1960s and gains achieved with desegregation of schools in the US. More important, it seemed all the educational struggles and achievements gained by the Mexican American community prior to the 1960s had evaporated. As the 1960s and 1970s emerged, it was as if the Chicano/a community had made no efforts in the realm of educational equity. Mexican American communities challenged the prevailing white supremacy ethos regarding Mexicans in the US for nearly a century by the 1960s. Dolores Delgado Bernal put it nicely when she stated:

The struggle for Chicanas/os for educational equity and the right to include their culture, history, and language in K-12 and higher education curricula predates the civil rights movement of the 1960s by decades. (1999)

Nevertheless, the Chicano community remained in an eternal struggle for educational rights. The integration of schools was set in motion by the early twentieth century Mexican American victories regarding the segregation and desegregation of their children and with the *Brown v. Board* decision of 1954 covering the nation. Yet, toward the last quarter of the twentieth century, communities of color remained set apart from white communities in the US. De facto segregation of Chicana/o school children remained highly visible. Additionally, many scholars argue that the “white social belief system about Mexicans helped support the many political and economic reasons for their continued segregation” (Bernal, 1999, p. 78). Further, images and theories that viewed whites as superior and Mexicans as unintelligent, inferior to Whites, unambitious, dirty, and disease-ridden were common racial characteristics held about Mexicans (Bernal, 1999).

Economically and socially, White educators often viewed Mexican school children through the lens of the labor of the Mexican parents. For example, my own education (Jerry Garcia) reflects this view. My K-12 education took place in a small rural agricultural community in Washington State where my parents were agricultural workers, as were most Mexican parents in this small community during the 1970s and 1980s. And this is how the white educators viewed us as children, not as potential college students or professionals, but the future backbone of the agricultural labor in this community. In my primary and secondary education, I do not recall any school official asking if I desired to attend university. In this manner, if you were of Mexican ancestry, you were tracked into farm labor, or in my experience, tracked into the military. Much of the literature on Chicano/a education illustrates this pattern of neglect that dates back decades, thus, my experience was and is common amongst Chicano/a school children and not an aberration or isolated incident.

In 1970, Ysidro Ramon Garcia said it pointedly regarding the need for educational reform that conformed with other elements of the Chicano Movement:

The Chicano Movement seeks to play educational roles in three areas: educating the people (Chicanos) regarding their political and economic status; educating Chicanos in their heritage, history, and customs, thereby increasing their self-awareness, pride, and effectiveness as individuals; and promoting institutionalized education within the communities, where little enthusiasm for education existed before (Macias, 1971). Put simply, the

state of Chicano/a education in the 1960s and 1970s was abysmal with multiple issues needing attention simultaneously. For example, one study indicated that of the total elementary and secondary student population in the Southwest, 17 percent were Chicanos, but only 4 percent of the teachers were Chicanos. The same study stated, there were approximately 20 Anglo students for every Anglo teacher in the Southwest and 120 Chicano students for every Chicano teacher (The struggle for Chicano liberation, 1971). During the 1970s, the dropout rate for Chicano students remained extremely high with one scholar citing that in 1974–1975, the percentage of Chicanos who had dropped out of high school was 38.7 percent and in 1977–1978, it rose to 44.1 percent. (Acuna, 2000, p. 413)

The Chicana/o Movement developed a widespread, diverse, national movement with activism and direction action paramount to success. There is no better place to see this activism emanating from the issues pertaining to education. Whether you were a student in K-12 or the university in California, Texas, Arizona, Colorado, Michigan, or Washington, a sense of common cause emerged due to the similar egregious nature and circumstances that existed for Chicano youth within the education system. Many of these youth were also encouraged and motivated by other movements emerging such as the modern civil rights movement exemplified by Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, and the Black Panthers. However, closer to home, the farm labor movement with Filipino, Punjab Indians, and Chicanos fighting for workers' rights in California provided awareness and a sense of urgency to address educational issues.

By the 1960s, a small number of Chicana/o students had made it into the university with many creating organizations aimed at addressing both K-12 and higher education issues. These organizations had names such as United Mexican-American Students (UMAS), Mexican American Student Association (MASA), and Mexican-American Youth Organization (Bernal, 1999). Goals for these student organizations included “Mexican American history courses, increase in the number of Mexican American instructors and administrators, and student involvement in decision making within the schools” (Vargas, 2011, p. 322). All these issues came to a breaking point in 1968 when over 10,000 students walked out of their classrooms in East Los Angeles in protest to the poor conditions in their schools. Additional walkouts would occur in 1969 and 1970 throughout the US, including in places such as Michigan, Texas, Colorado, and Arizona. According to Carlos S. Maldonado in his book, *Colegio Cesar Chavez*,

1973–1983: *A Chicano Struggle for Educational Self-Determination* (2000), many of the concerns by Chicana/o students were affirmed with a series of studies produced by the United States Commission on Civil Rights between 1971 and 1973, that “highlighted the failure of public schools in meeting the fundamental educational needs of Chicanos” (p. 11). Beginning in the 1960s, Chicana/o students, communities, and organizations began to demand educational equality and used any means necessary to achieve that goal.

### DECOLONIZING EDUCATION AND THE SEARCH FOR REFORM AND ALTERNATIVES

*The Schools, as in history have taken our children from the families to insert the qualities of a good American. But the problem with being a good American is that it was created to strip people of their cultural identity for the purpose of assimilation into a rat race of competition. If you refuse to race, your status is lowered for the purpose of cheap labor.* (David Sanchez, Prime Minister, Brown Berets (Sanchez))

There were at least two approaches used by Chicanas/os to increase educational equality. One was to reform the current system that for decades had neglected the needs of Chicana/o students. This meant working within an apparatus that viewed Chicanas/os with disdain and through the lens of white supremacy. For the dominant white population, this signaled a radical departure from their everyday social norms practiced that had for decades denigrated communities of color and the potential capitulation of an educational system they controlled and considered their exclusive domain. However, from the Chicana/o perspective, this represented demand for educational equality and community control of education, which had always been their right. Thus, by the late 1960s, we see the emergence of student radicalization unlike the previous decades. The development of student organizations (previously mentioned), community entities such as the Crusade for Justice, the Brown Berets, and student-led youth conferences that provided the foundational momentum for educational reform for the Chicana/o community.

The First National Chicano Liberation Youth Conference that occurred in Denver, Colorado in 1969 and hosted by the Crusade for Justice is considered a pivotal point regarding Chicana/o education reform and use of alternative structures to address education issues that impacted the

community. From this conference emerged what is considered one of the foundational documents of the Chicano Movement that provided a blueprint for Chicano national liberation and self-determination as conceived by *El Plan Espiritual de Aztlan* (Spiritual Plan of Aztlan). Of importance to this discussion are key elements relating to education. *El Plan Espiritual de Aztlan* made adamant that education must be relative to the experience and history of Chicanas/os, infused with culture, including bilingual education, the contributions Chicanos have made to the development of the US and the hemisphere.

The other conference that occurred the same year (1969) was held at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Out of this conference emerged *El Plan de Santa Barbara* (The Plan of Santa Barbara) and was envisioned by a cadre of university students, faculty, staff, and community members under the banner of The Chicano Coordinating Council on Higher Education. Some have argued that this conference and emergent plan was an extension of The First National Chicano Liberation Youth Conference discussed above (see Soladatenko, 2009, p. 28). In general, *El Plan de Santa Barbara* set out to restructure the Chicana/o experience at the university by mapping the direct participation and institutionalization of Chicanos and Chicano Studies at all levels of the university. *El Plan de Santa Barbara* provided a map for the development of Chicano Studies. *El Plan* also provided for the “development of the recruitment and admission of Chicano students, support programs to aid in the retention of Chicano students, and the organization of Chicano Studies curricula and departments” (Bernal, 1999, p. 84).<sup>4</sup> Both plans espoused the need for national liberation and self-determination and advocated the use of the educational system as a vehicle to make changes from within.

The Chicano Movement of the 1960s and 1970s created the environment where notions of self-determination, anti-colonial structures, and educational freedom not only rang loud, but many felt a sense of hope that educational alternatives for communities of color could be a reality. Thus, the second approach taken up by the Chicano Movement meant working outside mainstream educational and institutional construct. It should be noted that two of three alternative institutions discussed below aligned themselves with institutions that were, on the one hand, part of

<sup>4</sup>As noted by numerous scholars, including Bernal (1999), both *El Plan Espiritual* and *El Plan de Santa Barbara* had their limitations, especially regarding the exclusion of Chicanas and direct mention of Chicana liberation.

the mainstream structure, but, on the other, were not due to their educational philosophy and approach. More important, the Chicano alternative schools did this primarily to gain access to accreditation. Indeed, beginning in the 1960s, independent Chicano educational institutions began to emerge with the 1970s and 1980s, the golden era. Space constraints prevent a full detailed analysis, but a brief, discussion on a few schools provides a basic understanding of their development, philosophy, and eventual demise. One of the first to emerge was the Crusade for Justice's *Escuela and Colegio Tlatelolco*, which evolved from a summer Freedom School started in 1968. According to Carlos S. Maldonado, "the initiative offered an educational experience enriched with Chicano culture and history." Due to its summer Freedom success, in 1970, the *Escuela and Colegio Tlatelolco* was founded. Founder, Corky Gonzales, expressed his vision in this manner, "We are a living image of what we say we are doing. Our school is not a factory for granting degrees and providing tinkertoy children. We are in the process of nation-building" (Maldonado, 2000, pp. 14–15). When it functioned both as a K-12 institution and a *Colegio*, Tlatelolco was accredited through Goddard College (Maldonado, 2000, p. 17). The school went through several reorganizations with the most pronounced being the elimination of its *Colegio*, but maintaining the *Escuela* for K-12. For 46 years, *Escuela Tlatelolco* was considered the beacon of the Chicano Movement when it finally had to close its doors in 2017 due to low scores in the district's yearly School Performance Framework in student achievement and lack of progress over time. In its final year, the *Escuela* served 145 students from K-12 (Fine, 2017).

Another prominent, but short-lived independent effort, was *Colegio Jacinto Trevino* established in the winter of 1969–1970 in Mission, Texas by members of the Mexican American Youth Organization (MAYO). The name Jacinto Trevino was chosen as a tribute to a Chicano folk hero who resisted Anglo oppression in south Texas. Resistance as a symbol from the *Colegio*'s namesake was important during the period of the Chicano Movement as it represented elements of national liberation and an effort not to reform, but to completely break away from educational institutions that had prevented Chicanas/os from achieving their educational dreams and giving back to their community. Indeed, in 1970, *Colegio Jacinto Trevino* became the "nation's first all Chicano graduate program to produce teachers" (Maldonado, 2000, p. 17). An initial planning group of 15 set to establish the college, whose declared mission was "to develop a Chicano with conscience and skills, [to give] the barrios a global view,

[and] to provide positive answers to racism, exploitation, and oppression.” According to Aurelio M. Montemayor, the *Colegio* was established within the context of militant struggles for community control, growing discontent with Anglo-controlled institutions, and the formation of Chicana/o nationalist ideology, the founders created *Colegio Jacinto Trevino* as a viable institution to serve as an alternative to traditional colleges and universities. The school leaders established the school as a teacher’s college with the plan to develop a culturally relevant curriculum for primary and secondary education, and produce educators concerned with promoting the social and economic welfare of Chicana/o students (Montemayor, 1995). In 1971, *Colegio Jacinto Trevino* moved its base from Mission, Texas to Mercedes where it had a brick-and-mortar location for the first time. Like *Colegio Tlatelolco* out of Denver, *Colegio Jacinto Trevino* associated itself for accreditation with Antioch College in Yellow Springs, Ohio.

The life of *Colegio Jacinto Trevino* was short-lived due to a variety of factors. According to Maldonado (2000, p. 17), “The financial stress associated with establishing and operating an independent school led *Colegio Jacinto Trevino* to close its doors in 1976.” Another sign of trouble was related to internal disagreements between founding members. Montemayor indicates, “difficulties arose in the structure and governance of the college, criteria for selection of students and requirements for degrees... The board’s internal dynamics were political, intense, and eventually polarized in two identifiable camps. By the summer of 1971 irreducible tension resulted in the pulling away of one camp, with some of those members establishing another institution known as Juarez-Lincoln University” (Montemayor, 1995).

Former associates of *Jacinto Trevino College*, Leonard Mestas and Andre Guerrero, were two of the individuals that left due to political differences and founded Juarez-Lincoln University in Fort Worth, Texas. It moved in 1972 to Austin, Texas. Originally it was located on the campus of St. Edward’s university, but it then moved to its own campus in 1975 when it had about 200 students and it also became affiliated with Antioch College. The institution had three master of Education programs: the master of education program, as part of the Antioch Graduate School of Education; the bachelor of arts program, in conjunction with Antioch College; and the National Farmworker Information Clearinghouse, a national resource center collecting data on migrant farm workers and migrant programs (Garcia, 1995). Juarez-Lincoln curricula emphasized the bilingual and bicultural environment in which its students lived and

worked and encouraged them to invest their skills in the local community. The school followed the “university-without-walls” model, in which students designed their own projects with the assistance of faculty advisors. Juarez-Lincoln University closed in 1979, when Antioch University withdrew its support (Garcia, 1995).

Most of the alternative institutions that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s were primarily located in regions with the highest concentration of Chicanas/os, the southwest and California. However, the exception to this demographic trend was *Colegio Cesar Chavez*, located in the Pacific Northwest, specifically Mt. Angel, Oregon south of Portland in the Willamette Valley. Like the other institutions discussed, very little has been published on *Colegio Cesar Chavez*. The exception is Carlos S. Maldonado’s book, *Colegio Cesar Chavez, 1973–1983: A Chicano Struggle for Educational Self-Determination* (2000), which is quoted extensively in this section. Also used is a catalog published by *Colegio Cesar Chavez* during the academic year 1975–1976. This catalog provides insight to the philosophy and structure of the Colegio.

On December 12, 1973, what was formerly Mt. Angel College became *Colegio Cesar Chavez*. It is no coincidence that the new College emerged on the religious feast day of Our Lady of Guadalupe, the bronze skinned patron saint of the Americas. Since its inception, *Colegio Cesar Chavez* focused on several educational and cultural activities. The Colegio operated an Adult Basic Education program; A G.E.D. component; a childcare center; a College Without Walls program; a migrant summer school; and numerous community functions. Although *Colegio* was the successor of a small liberal arts school called Mt. Angel College, its founders stated that the idea of an institution focused on the needs of Chicana/o students had resonated with many due to the ongoing Chicano Movement when an independent Chicano institution seemed possible.

The overwhelming number of Chicano students, staff, faculty, and administrators of the Colegio came from farm worker backgrounds, which in many ways explains the name of the Colegio. However, it is interesting to note that the community considered other names as well. For example, Colegio Che Guevara, after the Cuban revolutionary hero, was considered. So was Colegio Ho Chi Minh, after the North Vietnamese leader, and Colegio Guadalupe, after Virgen de Guadalupe. Members of the Colegio were looking for a name that represented not only their ideals, but a name that evoked national liberation and self-determination. In the end, *Colegio Cesar Chavez* was chosen to honor the farm worker labor



leader for the work the union had been doing on behalf of farm laborers and fighting for their dignity in the fields. It should also be noted that “the majority of Northwest Chicanos came to the Northwest as part of the migrant farmworker stream during the post WWII decades (Garcia, 1995).

Out of the handful of private initiatives discussed thus far, *Colegio Cesar Chavez*, was perhaps the most robust and had the strongest potential for longevity. Yet, it started off on shaky ground due to its predecessors’ financial instability and loss of accreditation, which the Colegio inherited. When Mt. Angel College folded in 1973 the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) held a one-million-dollar mortgage loan that it provided to the College in 1966 for construction purposes. According to HUD, Mt. Angel College had not made a payment in the previous three years (Maldonado, 2000, p. 29). Nevertheless, the founders of the Colegio moved forward attempting to negotiate a deal with HUD. Maldonado credits a handful of individuals for the development of Colegio Cesar Chavez that range from Chicano student activists, the last President of Mt. Angel College, to several Chicano faculty and administrators who hammered together a vision for the College. The financial challenges, along with the recruitment of students, staff, faculty, in addition to developing the curriculum would have taxed even the most experienced institutions. Nevertheless, within two years, *Colegio Cesar Chavez* was able to secure accreditation candidacy status in June 1975 from the Northwest Association of Schools and Colleges (Maldonado, 2000, p. 42).

As part of the Chicano Movement, these independent institutions shared many traits such as their desire to reverse decades of segregation, discrimination, and an unequal education. They were also at the forefront of decolonizing the educational curriculum. The Chicano activists who either spearheaded educational reform or fought for alternative institutions represented a period of radical change. Indeed, one area that the institutions mentioned above shared was the College Without Walls Model (*Colegio Sin Paredes*). According to Maldonado, the College Without Walls is an alternative form of higher education created by the Union for Experimenting Colleges and Universities (UECU) in 1970. Most College Without Walls institutions attempted to adhere to a common set of principles. For example, recruit a broad range of students, especially in regards to age, active participation of students, faculty, and administrators in developing and implementing a College Without Walls program; orientation seminars on the philosophy and processes of the model; academic programs individually tailored to time, space, and content, the use of

alternative evaluation procedures, including the student's participation; and the instructor's role redefined to act as facilitators (Maldonado, 2000, p. 38). From Colegio's catalog, it is clear that they adhered to many, if not all, of the principles relating to this model.

Based on Maldonado's study, in its ten-year history, it does not appear that *Colegio Cesar Chavez* ever enjoyed any sense of financial stability, which had a cascading effect on the institution. The administrators of the Colegio spent most of their time fighting HUD over the one-million-dollar loan and Northwest Association for Schools and Colleges regarding accreditation. These two issues hampered efforts to solidify the Colegio's foundation, and impacted the recruitment of students, faculty, and staff. After receiving accreditation candidacy status in 1975, Colegio was never able to follow up with its financial stability report to the Association. This situation escalated with NWASC removing candidacy status from the Colegio in 1977, which was reinstated by court order when Colegio challenged the rescinding of candidacy status, which gave the Colegio until 1981 to become fully accredited. These struggles eventually manifested into internal strife at the Colegio, which was another contributing factor to its demise. Maldonado argues that these two struggles contributed to the eventual folding of *Colegio Cesar Chavez* in 1983 or as the Colegio's last President, Irma Gonzales, stated regarding its demise, "...The critics are right when they say it is the longest running death in history" (Maldonado, 2000, p. 5).

As we segue into a discussion on the development and implementation of *El Colegio Chicano del Pueblo*, we must ask ourselves, "what have we learned from these earlier attempts to create independent institutions of Chicano education?" Will *El Colegio Chicano del Pueblo* meet with a similar fate? It is too early to tell, but many lessons can be learned from these previous attempts, and we certainly understand and see the financial viability of these institutions' as paramount to success. In many ways, the dreams and aspirations of *El Colegio Chicano del Pueblo* are like earlier attempts, but differences also exist, mainly that nearly 50 years separate these earlier efforts from our contemporary alternative. *El Colegio Chicano del Pueblo* currently exists online only, a platform that did not exist in the 1960s and 1970s. Thus, we have been able to launch and implement without any cost other than our labor, which we do out of the appreciation we have for the community we serve and the field of Chicana/o Studies. Yet, we also share many commonalities, especially bringing Chicano education to the community, which has always been the goal, whether it be 1970 or 2020, when *El Colegio Chicano del Pueblo* launched.

## EL COLEGIO CHICANO DEL PUEBLO: LAYING THE FOUNDATION

In November 2019, a group of Chicano/a activists from around the country met in San Antonio, TX., to discuss the formation of a new non-profit organization they named Mexicanos 2070. The name is a homage to the 52-year cycle that is an integral part of the Mexica count of days. The fundamental question for the gathering was, “where will the Chicana/o community be in 50 years?” The attendees in San Antonio in the late fall 2019 asked similar questions and positioned the organization to respond to where the Chicano/a community wants to be in 50 years (2070)? Simultaneously, the group questioned what had been accomplished in the 50 years since the launch of the Chicano Movement in 1970.

Armando Rendon, the author of the seminal Chicano Movement book *The Chicano Manifesto* (1971) and one of the main organizers behind the San Antonio meeting, started the conversation by writing and publishing a document he titled “The Blueprint for the next 50 years” in part wrote

Fifty years ago, at the height of the Chicano Movement, would have been the ideal period to look ahead to the next 50 years and to establish an oversight committee, so to speak, to lay a framework for addressing issues then current and what might lie ahead. Diverse interests, limited financial and communications resources, and geographic distances among the various parts of the movement made it virtually impossible to organize and develop long-term plans in the 1970s. (Rendon, 2019)

In that document, Rendon listed what he terms general areas of concern: Education, Stewardship of the Earth, Keeping Alive The Chicano Movement and Chicanismo, Self-Governance, full political participation, international relations and the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, alliance with all American Indian tribes. According to Rendon, these are important areas where the Chicano community must focus to survive as a distinct grouping of people.

At that meeting, it was decided that among other things, Mexicanos 2070 would create a community organizing course based on curriculum work already completed by Ernesto Mireles at Prescott College, and that those workshops would be offered in person to grass roots organizations. The course would be a combination of community organizing skills and more advanced strategy building, which, in the opinion of those

assembled in San Antonio, was an important next step in re-engaging and reconnecting crucial Chicano movement elements scattered across the country in their respective communities.<sup>5</sup>

By June 2020, it was clear the United States was in the grip of an epidemic that would soon cross a threshold to become a global pandemic, and that no one would be returning to in-person classes in the foreseeable future. Although I have been teaching (Mireles) at the university level since 2007, I had zero online teaching experience, and little desire to do so. Prior to the outbreak of COVID-19, I viewed online teaching as a lesser mode of delivery, not to be taken too seriously and a threat to the traditional livelihood of professors. What I began to realize over the summer of 2020 was the massive outreach taking place across the globe. I was no stranger to online teaching platforms like Moodle, and Blackboard—I wasn't really a fan—and saw them mostly as an annoyance, something I was required to do by the administration. However, the Covid pandemic taught me the importance of these digital spaces as sites of knowledge collection and dispersal.

I reached out to Dr. Jerry Garcia, whom I've known since he was a faculty member at Michigan State University (MSU), and I was a PhD student. We both had worked together along with other students, faculty, and community members to establish a PhD program in Chicano/Latino Studies at MSU in 2007. However, by 2020 we had each left MSU, and I was a faculty member at Prescott College and Dr. Garcia with Sea Mar Community Health Centers as their Vice President for Educational Programs. As a trained historian, I viewed Dr. Garcia as a natural fit to help establish our first two courses, which were community organizing and

<sup>5</sup>I (Ernesto) had been teaching at Prescott College in Prescott, AZ., since 2013, when I was hired to help build a new master's program in social justice and community organizing. Since the early 1990s, I had been working as an organizer in different capacities around the Midwest. My work had primarily focused on the Xicano/Latino community, but I did work for several unions and on electoral campaigns for democratic candidates. It was during that time in the early 2000s I decided to return to school where I got a master's in social work and then decided to go directly into an American Studies PhD program at Michigan State University, where I specialized in Xicano Studies. It was this unusual combination of skills that positioned me for the Prescott College job. Jerry Garcia has been teaching in Chicano/Latino Studies since 1999 with appointments at Iowa State University, Michigan State University, Director of Chicano Studies at Eastern Washington University. When this project was conceived, he was in the private non-profit sector in Seattle working with Chicano-founded Sea Mar Community Health Centers as their Vice President of Educational Programs.

Chicano/a History. In the end, we settled on Google Classroom as our online classroom space. It is free and the platform was used by public school districts across the country, including my daughter's school in Prescott, AZ. As a result of working with her, I was able to see firsthand how Google Classroom works and reasoned that a good number of people who might take courses were probably familiar with the program through helping their children with their own online schooling. There was a learning curve for google classroom, but I found it to be intuitive and straightforward.

In the late summer of 2020, Dr. Garcia and I began shaping our courses, which we originally conceived as asynchronous. Our plan was to post the course content and let students go through it at their leisure. We deliberately settled on September 16, 2020 (Mexican Independence Day) as our launch date. In our conversations about how we might measure success with enrollment, we both agreed that 50 people signing up would be a real success. We wrote one press notice (which to date is the only promotion) that was released online the week of September 16, 2020. Two weeks later we had approximately 400 people sign up to be a part of the Colegio. We were not prepared for such a high number and although we were excited, simultaneously we felt overwhelmed because it was just the two of us at this period. Yet, we saw the potential and the need for community-based Chicana/o Studies, not just based on the sheer numbers, but also *testimonios* we received from students from throughout the United States.

## THE FIRST COURSES

*I am a Mexican American with a bachelor's degree. I studied Latin American History and Literature, but the university did not offer Chicano Studies.*  
(Monica Carpenter, Tennessee)

Originally, we designed the Colegio courses to run asynchronously. Our goal was to emulate the MOC (Massive Online Courses) that had gained such popularity in the years immediately preceding the creation of the Colegio. What we quickly realized was that it wasn't going to work the way we had hoped. I think this is true for several reasons, but the main one being a general lack of experience in the Chicana/o/x community with self-directed learning. It was also clear that a significant number of students who signed up for these initial offerings were also individuals who

did not have much experience with post-secondary education. From our goals and perspective, these were exactly the type of students we wanted, but with only two people driving these efforts in addition to full-time positions, it was a challenge. Dr. Garcia and I were deluged with email requests for help and explanations of how to both use the platform and explanations of the readings. The response from students was overwhelming and it became clear to us by the end of 2020, just a few short months after launching, that to accomplish what we originally envisioned in terms of bringing this information to a broad swath of our community, the Colegio courses would need to meet via online synchronization. The asynchronous pedagogy we started with was not suitable for most students who signed up. Many needed guidance, face-to-face via zoom learning platform, and the motivation that they were learning from trained Chicano Studies professionals. This approach has had better outcomes and it is the path we will continue to deploy.

Making that switch was easy enough, and we decided to continue offering the courses for free. Everyone involved, from Dr. Garcia and me to the board of Mexicanos 2070, felt this was the most crucial aspect of the project. We see it, however small it may be, that a no-fee tuition as a pushback against the growing commodification of knowledge and education. The commitment to free knowledge is a critical aspect of this project. More than one student has expressed this sentiment,

*I have always wanted to take Xicano (studies) courses, but the cost was always in the way of this. This is appealing because it's at no cost. That's huge for me.*  
(Jorge Bautista, California. Colegio student)

As Chicano studies scholars, we are acutely aware of the price that is paid for this knowledge. We are also very concerned about the lack of real access Chicana/o/x community members have to higher education that includes the opportunity to take Chicano Studies courses. This decision has presented problems with recruiting qualified professors, but has not stopped the work. As of this writing, the 6–8 faculty teaching courses do this for no compensation and out of the sheer desire to teach, share knowledge with the community, and their devotion to the community. The Colegio has yet to do any serious grant writing or development, but our current model will eventually require the Colegio to begin compensating faculty for their work, even though all would continue to do it for free. In the current system we live in (capitalistic), someone's labor of love has

intrinsic value on multiple levels, and for too long, communities of color have been asked to labor for free, while others profit from it. The Colegio does not want to perpetuate this cycle. Additionally, future faculty recruitment efforts will focus on reaching out to Chicano Studies professors for sabbatical courses. We believe from anecdotal evidence there are a significant number of professors who would like to teach in the Colegio, but are heavily taxed by their professional responsibilities at other locations. Part of Colegio's philosophy remains imbued with the origins of Chicanos Studies that our work needs to benefit the community directly and especially the ideals of the alternative institutions of the past. For example, we see elements of *Colegio Cesar Chavez's* philosophy guiding our project when they stated

At the Colegio [Cesar Chavez], the past and present learning, Chicano values, and ideas, as well as culture and feelings converge. This leads to the reaffirmation of, and in some instances, the formulation and development of Chicano philosophy in all aspects of the Chicano experience. (Colegio Cesar Chavez Catalog, 1975–1976, pp. 6–7)

We also remain cognizant of the history we shared regarding the trajectory and unfortunate demise of the alternative institutions briefly discussed. The common denominator that caused the untimely end for many 1960s and 1970s alternative institutions revolved around financial instability. Although there were other issues as well, most institutions can weather disagreements if there is financial stability. In our opinion, we remain in the early stages of development and even though we are currently an online platform with no overhead or “real” costs, we also understand that not only must we eventually compensate our faculty, but we may have to begin to charge a nominal fee to take one of our courses. A financial model for *El Colegio Chicano del Pueblo* remains a work in progress. We are optimistic as we move forward that there is a demographic in the US and beyond that we can serve. This can be seen from the surveys we have conducted. First, we survey students who have taken or wish to take courses with El Colegio.

For El Colegio, a demographic breakdown shows that students herald from 49 states, and Puerto Rico, with 3.8% identifying as non-binary, 65% as female, 30.2% as male, 1.8 % declined to answer. Also interesting is the fact that 70.8% have never taken a Xicano studies course, and 59.1% would like to receive college credit. During a time when large-scale cultural

battles are taking place over history and the right to tell history, what we see in the response to the Colegio Chicano is a solid desire on the part of the largest minority group in the country to know their history, culture, and place politically. While Xicanos and other Latinos may not become the numerically dominant group in the nation, they will become the largest portion of the demographic plurality in the country within a few decades. And although the field of Chicano/Latino Studies has expanded to nearly every region of the country since the 1970s, there remains part of our community that continues to not have access to this level of knowledge and education. More important, this type of knowledge and understanding of history and experience is crucial for Chicano/Latino communities to mobilize and either to continue to maintain control of their communities or learn how, especially in this polarizing era. Further, as our course offerings become more diverse, the Colegio feels confident our institution can play a vital role in this endeavor.

Since the Fall of 2020, we have consistently offered free courses in Chicano Studies to our registered students and the public. Currently our portfolio of courses include Xicano Art—Exploring your post-Xicanismo; Introduction to Mexican American Studies; Bringing Chicano History to the Present; Organizing in Diverse Communities; Community Journalism for Social Movements; Digital Aztlan—Chicano Storytelling in the age of digital media; Música Chicana: The Commodification of a Chicano/a art form (1960 to the Present); Building Chicano Political Power; and Introduction to the Corrido. In its current configuration, *El Colegio Chicano del Pueblo* follows an open admission policy. Anyone can take one of our courses regardless of educational background by simply enrolling via our website. For the long term, El Colegio is developing a curriculum that will allow students to earn a certificate, minor and eventually an undergraduate degree in Chicano/a Studies. To some degree, El Colegio already incorporates elements of the *Colegio Sin Paredes* model (College Without Walls Model). For example, Colegio attempts to stay away from just lecture-type classrooms and have students spending much of their time involved in community activities and in small group study activities. As we build out the Colegio, many students will be involved with community work, field placements, and jobs.

The Colegio has 8-week sessions for each course. Instructors are responsible for selecting, with their students, a time for the class to meet that accommodates as many as possible. We have used the record function



in google classroom to accommodate students who cannot make that time but still want the information and the discussion. Each course is run like a graduate seminar with reading and discussion being the focus of the work. In the beginning, we debated whether to give grades, but ultimately decided grading was counterproductive to the popular education ideology we espouse and reified the power dynamic of the professor/student binary we were working to disrupt. As stated in the foundational document written to explain the working of the colegio:

Each CCP course is designed to incorporate community-based work outside the digital classroom. Participants and instructors will work together to lift and expand upon their collective knowledge of their immediate Xicana/o/x community and the political-cultural skills gained through years of direct experience living in and serving the Xicana/o/x communities in their professional and personal work experience.

Efforts like the Colegio are important to the political development of the Xicana/o/x community. They create and imagine a future where the teaching of subaltern history is not being constantly reframed as alternative or adversarial to settler colonial hegemony. The current pushback against so-called critical race theory is just the latest example of the success of ethnic studies programs. As noted above, these classes have made significant inroads into the everyday Xicana/o/x community.

### XICANO STUDIES AND THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

*I am a Mexican American woman who grew up “white-washed.” I know nothing about the history of my culture or where to even begin to look. I think it is unfortunate that for at least 12 years of our lives in school we learn the history of America without getting the full picture. Once we decide to pursue higher education is when we are given the opportunity to delve into these types of studies and work. I appreciate that the Colegio is offering this online course so that anyone anywhere in their academic life can have a place to acquire this knowledge and begin to have these conversations about what our history really is. (Angelina Vasquez, New York. Colegio student)*

Xicana/o/x people stand on a precipice. Below us an endless chasm of knowledge reclamation both in terms of national identity and international emergence as a sovereign group of people. As a community we

simply must step forward into the uncertain future by embracing the plunge, or we can step back to the relative safety of the flatlands of our conquered past. It is clear from the overwhelming response El Colegio received, a hunger for knowledge remains, but not just any knowledge, but one that speaks to the needs of the Chicana/o community and its experience. A level of knowledge that will help this community take back their self-determination by controlling their destiny, rather than follow someone else's. There is a population of Chicanos and Latinos that for a variety of reasons that includes a level of forced assimilation, K-12 and even university neglect of providing appropriate instruction regarding the Chicano/Latino experience, and a lack of access to traditional modes of instruction, that has prevented this community from learning and understanding their own experience. El Colegio Chicano del Pueblo hopes to fill this void.

As discussed earlier in the chapter, the Chicano community has a long history of seeking educational achievement and attainment, contrary to popular belief. Since 1848, Chicanos have sought and fought for educational parity in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Indigenous education curriculum created by those who have lived history, not Indigenous education provided by the settler colonial system is a key feature in understanding how an institution like the Colegio vehicles of resistance to settler colonial domination are. Resistance has always been one of key ingredients of Chicano alternative forms of education, even within the traditional university setting. Ethnic and Chicano Studies have strived for a pedagogy that challenges the master narrative, that brings research, teaching, and knowledge to the community and not imply for the sake of the institution. The question of the precipice is one of space, time, and will. Where can Chicanos in the United States find the space to build these movements, at the very least introduce concepts of resistance to colonial domination. The time, which is truly the question as the work and sacrifices we make for work speed up within late capitalism.

As we pushed forward with the Colegio courses, several questions began to arise that spoke directly to the Blueprint document written by Rendon: how can we as a community expect full participation culturally, socially, economically, and politically from a group of people who feel they have been purposely misled about their history and presence? What role do programs like the *Colegio Chicano del Pueblo* play in education and political development outside of the traditional structures of academia?

Given the ongoing nature of the current immigration crisis, attacks on organized labor, higher education, and the long-term political issues facing the Xicana/o/x community, the need to expand exponentially access to history, literature, and political education in the Xicanx community is dire. The promise of Xicano Studies from its earliest inception in the Plan de Santa Barbara was to bring political organization and knowledge directly to the community. This has not happened for a variety of reasons; however, we at CCP believe the democratization of technology has finally provided an arena to fulfill that promise.

*I want to be able to learn more about my own culture. Living in Los Angeles and being born of 2 immigrants; 1 of which I do not know (father), my mother remarried a white man who knew no better but took my first language away from me (Spanish). I have always felt that there is a piece of me missing (my language, my sense of belonging) and I have been searching for those pieces of me that I know are a part of me and my past. I also want to be able to pass my knowledge to my offspring which my mother was unable to teach me. (Angelica Perez-Johnston, Pennsylvania)*

As a discipline, Xicano studies predates the struggles for Ethnic Studies historically centered on the San Francisco State University student strike of 1969. While Xicana/o studies as a discipline is often regarded as a foundational part of the Ethnic Studies curriculum, there are important distinctions that must be made and kept in mind. For example, Ethnic Studies at its base is an investigation into power differentials that exist in our society. This is important because of the primary role race has played in America over the past 500 years. Xicano studies (as a part of ethnic studies) is not simply an objective field of sociological or anthropological study, nor is Xicano Studies founded in an investigation of power differences in the United States. It is not a path to racial reconciliation between the colonizer and the colonized. The potential of Xicano Studies is that as a field it is first and foremost a foundational academic discipline within anti-colonial thought and social action. A decolonization project that foreshadows a sense of national identity, pride, and cooperation. Chicano Studies is first and foremost a way of realizing Amílcar Cabral's "return to history," the re-emergence of Chicanos as a national grouping (Cabral, 1966). Chicano Studies does not belong to the university. Chicano Studies belonged to the people; it is a heritage of humanity.

## THE FUTURE OF EDUCATION IN THE XICANA/O/X COMMUNITY

*I am most interested in learning about my indigenous roots, the history of my ancestors, and would like to challenge myself to embrace the opportunity to benefit from a program like this one that does not discriminate and does not present a Euro-centric view of the materials covered. I would also like to fortify my own Latinx identity, which I feel has been discouraged ever since my family came here from Mexico. Lastly, I think my late father, who was a professor, would have loved this program and even volunteered to offer a course.* (Catherine Luz Schwieg, Virginia. Colegio student)

*El Colegio Chicano del Pueblo* is not a new idea. It is an idea that has moved into the digital era of the twenty-first century. Many of the arguments happening in key states like Texas and California about the inclusion of ethnic studies into K-12 classrooms centers on how to make the proposed curriculum fit the requirements of the state for inclusion. We argue that this makes the inclusion of Chicano and Ethnic Studies into mainstream curriculum vulnerable to co-optation later.

The arguments over identity continue to rage within the Xicana/o/x community. It is not surprising considering the unique position Xicanos occupy in the United States as the largest indigenous population. The ongoing reconnection (or emergence) of indigenous identity is deeply rooted in the epistemological survival of native knowledge systems despite the best efforts of settler colonialism to eradicate that knowledge. The role of the Colegio and similar grassroots educational programs is one of preservation and reinvention. We have tremendous respect and admiration for the alternative institutions that not only preceded us, but in many ways, including their struggles, have provided a road map to create and implement Chicano education with purpose. After studying the 1960s and 1970s attempts, we must ask, just like Maldonado regarding *Colegio Cesar Chavez*, are “Colegios doomed to fail?” Financial stability remained a constant issue in the 1960s and 1970s because of the “brick-n-mortar” model prevalent in that era. As a startup, we are fortunate that technology has allowed us the flexibility to not be shackled by such considerations and we are also fortuitous to have a cadre of instructors who have a similar philosophy and vision for Mexicanos 2070 and *El Colegio*.

We are also realistic that the road ahead will require serious and sometimes uncomfortable conversation regarding the direction of *El Colegio*,

but we also feel confident that such conversation will lead us down the right path. Further, we remain aware that if El Colegio can maintain its growth, we will need to develop and expand to include such things as strengthening the academic model, developing additional academic programs that the community has shown interest with such as the medical field, health sciences, and the business fields. El Colegio will need to eventually provide a network of student services and establish fiscal and management systems. As previously mentioned, El Colegio remains in its early phase as we continue to build out, especially from the course offering perspective. However, we feel confident we have found an “educational niche” that will drive our growth by maintaining a tuition free institution, while simultaneously securing funding sources to strengthen our foundation. One area that remains important is whether EL Colegio will seek a partner with established accreditation as did the earlier alternative institutions. El Colegio also has the option to go at it alone and create the environment for self-sufficiency. There is also the case to be made that perhaps El Colegio can become the first Historically Chicano College in a similar vein to Historically Black Colleges and Universities. Yet, some of these alternatives and options invite institutions that historically have not been friendly to the Chicano community, that is, the federal government or other state entities.

Through this article, we hope the reader has a better understanding of the struggles, challenges, and triumphs the Chicano community has had over the past 170 plus years. There is no doubt that education has been important and paramount to Chicano community development over the decades and that education plays multiple roles within the community. For those of us involved with this Colegio, education is empowerment, education represents self-determination, and education represents the future direction of the Chicano community, and education is something that is difficult to eradicate after it has been learned. *El Colegio Chicano del Pueblo* follows in the footsteps of the individuals, organizations, and communities that have valiantly fought for our educational rights under the most intense forms of racism, white supremacy, and state sponsored terrorism. *El Colegio Chicano del Pueblo* is honored to continue this struggle to eradicate settler colonialism in all its forms, but also “liberate our oppressor” as Paulo Freire (1970) so eloquently stated in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

*Once social change begins, it cannot be reversed. You cannot uneducate the person who has learned to read. You cannot humiliate the person who feels pride. You cannot oppress the people who are not afraid anymore.* (Cesar Chavez, 1984)

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# Agility or Stability: Can a School Have Both in Faculty Hiring?

*Sarah Harris*

Progressive and innovative educational institutions, such as those featured in this book, have long endeavored to teach ideas and practices that support democratic ideals, including informed and effective participation in the political sphere (Jackson, 2008). Such schools deliver on this promise by teaching students the knowledge and habits that enable effective engagement as change-makers toward the betterment of society. But who are the educators best suited and qualified to teach and model this for them, and what makes them so? Because institutions often hire with hopes that a faculty member will stay and guide their students in and out of the classroom for 20 or more years, the decisions we make with regards to which faculty to hire could not be more crucial for setting the school's course, and yet most schools stick with decidedly non-innovative models for faculty appointment and promotion. In other words, innovative schools need innovative faculty if they are to offer a dynamic and

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responsive curriculum, and yet most fail to challenge preexisting assumptions about who their faculty should be.

The current chapter offers a case study of two programs at a small student-centered liberal arts college in southern Vermont: Bennington College. While Bennington has long been known for its visible impact in the arts, it has strengths and innovative approaches across its programs, and the two programs under consideration here are the Center for the Advancement of Public Action (CAPA) and Cultural Studies and Languages (CSL). The differing approaches between these two programs hint at tensions between the pedagogical ideas that underpin the progressive educational imperative, and the realities and challenges confronting current hiring practices in higher education (including the mismatch between the practice of tenure amidst financial and demographic shifts, among others).<sup>1</sup> While part of preparing and training students for democratic engagement is responding to the current social and political environment, which entails the agile development of new programming, and student-driven institutions must respond to ever-changing students needs, this endless responsiveness adds institutional pressures to support a constant influx of new faculty, which can itself be expensive and difficult to support adequately. In addition, curricular responsiveness can entail short-term initiatives that rest on hiring non-traditional instructors such as community organizers or other socially engaged practitioners, which may be a good innovation, but one with shortcomings. Is it possible for truly innovative institutions to remain stable or is the inherent contradiction between innovation and stability forever at odds?

Adding another wrinkle, there are programs so unusual and individualized that there are no ready-made teaching materials, and their faculty need sustained time, practice, support, and other resources to develop specialized skills for their delivery and continual updating. In addition, faculty investments of time and engage in advising and mentorship toward the prolonged support of student development. This investment matters because, as Felten and Lambert and others have demonstrated, students thrive and find greater success when they have authentic personal connections with their mentors, many of whom are faculty (Felten and Lambert, 2020). Indeed, Laura Wenk's chapter in this volume points out

<sup>1</sup>In 2021, Steven Mitz argued that the biggest challenge facing higher education is non systemic, though, but rather its inability to challenge assumptions about ingrained practices, something with which this volume endeavors to engage.

how many students identified an important faculty member as a “primary mentor” in the long-ranging study she conducted across several colleges.

To allow for the substantial faculty development this requires, an institution must also commit to consistent long-term faculty hiring practices. How do we support these two, sometimes contradictory, imperatives at an institutional level through hiring practices, even within one school? Exemplifying this tension, CAPA and CSL both exhibit their institution’s core values of student-directed pedagogies, the education of the whole student, and development of skills for engaging in a wider society, but they respond to these same values in very different ways in terms of course design and consistency of faculty presence.

This chapter asks, first: In what ways does each of these programs grow out Bennington’s history of disrupting longstanding—and sometimes unquestioned—faculty hiring practices, as an element of progressive education that supports and models whole-student development? Second: What lessons can we learn from these examples in the current moment? Bennington was founded as a site for experimentation and iterative reflection on learning, where students design their own course of study in conversation with faculty advisors, and annual internships for each student, each year, have been required since the school’s founding. The arts have been included on the same level as other disciplines since the origin of the school. From my position as Dean of Faculty at this non-hierarchical and non-departmental institution, with no constraints on decisions of which faculty teach what, and no department chair liaisons, I have a unique perspective on hiring practices that span the entire school, and a concrete, overarching role in envisioning and implementing faculty hiring priorities.

### AN AGILE PROGRAM, A STABLE FACULTY

CAPA is set up to respond to current trends and emerging political and social issues such as democracy in peril, human rights and peacebuilding, forced migration, and art and/as public action. CAPA invites students to engage in the world around them in an active way, working on real-world problems. The faculty who guide the development of this work come from wide-ranging backgrounds and rely on varied hiring models, including short-term grant funding. What is unusual about these faculty is that they may not possess the traditional credentialing certifications, such as

terminal degrees, that many institutions expect or require as proof of “expertise,” defined as scholarly rather than co-curricular learning.

Meanwhile, and across the metaphorical quad, CSL invites students to learn language skills and cultural content in and through the cultures themselves, a practice that also engages empathic development of putting oneself in another’s shoes. This teaching practice and approach are complex enough to demand a long-term commitment to faculty development and ongoing discussions of disciplinarily shared pedagogies. In the classroom, this may mean every student of Japanese learns and demonstrates social norms of Japanese classrooms behavior while discussing what Japanese children’s textbooks teach them about World War II, for instance. They learn Japanese, and demonstrate cultural competency, through engagement with materials that Japanese students would historically receive. What is innovative about this approach is that it prioritizes culture and intellectual sophistication from the very first day of a student’s engagement with a language, breaking down the usual divide between introductory “language” classes and more advanced courses that ask students to *do something* meaningful and intellectually sophisticated *in the language* being studied, and rather than othering those who live in that language. As a result, many of our CSL faculty’s publication records explore pedagogical and educational concerns rather than, or in conjunction with, those centered on their scholarly research. This being the only wholesale program of its kind in the nation, there are no published textbooks that adequately support CSL’s approach, so all materials are the design and intellectual property of the faculty members themselves. This is one reason that long-term faculty appointments and development are essential.

The pedagogical innovation of this approach to interweaving students’ intellectual sophistication and scaffolding their language development demands a commitment to the slow process by which faculty, often over decades, break down the disciplinary bounds that have long defined language instruction. No current graduate programs prepare faculty for this type of engagement or approach to teaching, and this kind of “unlearning” of the traditional expectations for language study takes continued attention to develop. For example, two faculty members who teach in Japanese and in French, have developed materials for students to engage with pressing political events and cultural contexts using Virtual and Augmented Reality devices. These faculty have upcoming publications on their approaches, and they present at national and international conferences so other faculty may learn from this innovative approach to

developing intercultural skills and empathic engagement in students. One such lesson uses proprietary 3D video and GoogleGlass VR technology to allow students to “walk around” and explore the plaza where Josephine Bonaparte’s decapitated statue was toppled in Martinique (Woods, 2020). Yes, the lessons growing out of this embodied engagement are linguistic (students hear local people speaking and read the signs in the plaza and they discuss in French what they see and notice) but they also open the door for deep engagement with the historical and cultural elements behind the colonial history of France and Martinique as well. The lesson also offers equitable access to places students may not otherwise have resources to experience firsthand. This one example among thousands hints at the kinds of materials and lessons CSL faculty develop to promote deep and socially engaged learning for and with their students.

The different approaches to promoting student engagement (in CSL vs. in CAPA) also point to the varied challenges that progressive colleges face with regards to reconsidering hiring practices. This chapter offers considerations that will be useful for other institutions, those steeped in their own innovative educational projects, but also for schools with other kinds of institutional objectives as well. Many schools—no matter the type—may lack a wholesale and institutional-level philosophy around faculty hiring strategies (beyond “getting the best and brightest,” that is, those with stellar academic credentials, to join the faculty, or responding to departmental demands and funding opportunities), and a thoughtful institutional hiring philosophy can better support any institution’s primary mission.

## IN THE BEGINNING

Bennington College has aimed to disrupt common practice in academia from its beginning. One of several progressive institutions across the US that emerged and/or reinvented itself in a moment of substantial social turmoil, the idea for its founding emerged in the 1920s, as a corrective for the lack of intellectual and artistic opportunities for young women, and to “react to and build upon changes in society, technology, and culture.”<sup>2</sup> What seems a miracle now is that the opening of the school coincided with the biggest economic crash the US has ever seen, and that the school

<sup>2</sup> See Bennington’s website, “Vision and History” <https://www.bennington.edu/about/vision-and-history>.

survived. Thomas Brockway's *Bennington College: In the Beginning* (1981), a book published on the 50th anniversary of the college, offers the perspective of a trained historian and participant-observer.<sup>3</sup> *In the Beginning* quotes the original brochure that proposed the founding of the college as a site for education that would “raise an individual human being to his highest possible effectiveness as a unit in society” (p. 31). In addition, Bennington was designed to be open to continual experimentation. Specifically, Professor William Heard Kilpatrick's studies with John Dewey and previous appointments at Teachers College at Columbia University and many other universities informed his approach to innovation—and a knowledge about what traditions he'd be disrupting. Kilpatrick's original model included an attempt to “save Bennington from paralysis based on complacency,” and so mandated that “permanent provision would be made for continuing external criticism” (Brockway, 1981, p. 19).

Thus, Bennington joined the ranks of several similarly-minded institutions that arose in response to challenges connected to notable increases in urbanization and industrialization late in the previous century. It was offered from the beginning as an alternative and a corrective to the status quo, and it continues to work to sharpen its contributions in this space, while also fighting the stagnating effects of trying to be stable. Most of the schools among this group owe an existential debt to John Dewey, who, among other things, developed curricular and methodological proposals that focused on elements still visible in progressive institutions: active engagement, whole-person education, independent and critical thinking, inclusion of the creative arts, project-based learning, and real-world experiences. Further, Veysey's historical consideration of universities notes that Dewey insisted on education's role in offering tertiary instruction such that students can meet “public needs” and that culture only had meaning as it functioned “in the conditions of modern life, of daily life, of political and industrial life” (Veysey, 1965, p. 115). Of course, as the conditions of “modern life” keep changing, colleges interested in being innovative need to continue to innovate.

<sup>3</sup>Brockway was faculty at Bennington starting in 1933, and he earned his doctorate four years later from Yale. He taught history at Bennington and served as dean from 1952–61, as well as serving as acting president on three different occasions. These experiences add an interesting personal angle to his historical survey of the college's beginnings (Reed Magazine).

For students at Bennington, this now means the coming term's curricular "publication day" is met with fervent anticipation and curiosity because courses come and go quickly in response to student and faculty passions. It means that most faculty begin the semester by asking students to share why they have chosen to make that particular class part of their self-designed course of study. Faculty ask, not out of mere curiosity, but in order to shift the syllabus to accommodate students' individual passions and needs. Flexible projects and assignments allow students to explore their own questions while demonstrating their skill development. It means that, because no two students follow the same trajectory, seminar-style class sessions offer a true opportunity for students to consider and contribute myriad perspectives and areas of nascent expertise.

Perhaps the most salient element of progressive education when considered in the context of "beyond innovation" is the idea of schools as laboratories. Not simply a laboratory for the students, though they are asked to take an active part in learning by doing, but also on the level of the administration and experimentation on an institutional level. A school functioning as a laboratory, where participants in all roles learn by doing, sometimes entails living with the tension and uncertainty between what we know and what we don't yet know about how each new generation of students—indeed, to some degree, how each student—learns best. For instance, what is most important when we consider which faculty a school should hire to teach these students? Educational credentials? Experience in the working world related to the curricular area? Teaching experience? Willingness to experiment? Openness to teaching in a student-centered fashion?

If an institution is to continually respond to the current moment in which it finds itself, so that students will emerge with the knowledge and habits to engage with the ever-evolving political sphere, should it hire faculty that spend their time outside of the "bubble" of academia? Should there be an always-evolving slate of faculty brought in to offer students curricula *de rigueur* according to the cultural climate and its most pressing concerns, perhaps relying on non-traditional candidates and short-term commitments to new instructors, or should the institution commit to the long-term development and well-being of the faculty, such that they might develop pedagogical skills that maximize student learning? Although they coexist in one college with a clear mission, the two programs explored in this chapter take contrasting approaches to these questions, both in the service of meeting students' intellectual development and learning needs.

In considering each program in turn, I offer hints at what other schools can learn from a commitment to continual experimentation.

### CAPA: INNOVATION AND A LEGACY OF DISRUPTING TRADITION

Bennington’s founders thought carefully about faculty hiring practices and the ways in which these would or wouldn’t be similar to those at other more traditional schools. The statement to the original trustees noted that “The faculty will have to have something more than scholarship, experience and professional standing,” specifically a “belief in the tenets of progressive education” (Brockway, 1981, p. 32). The founding president, Leigh, stated that he was searching for “young men and women who had an ‘understanding of and enthusiastic interest in’ their own fields, undergraduate students and the principles and problems of modern education” (Brockway, 1981, p. 52). They were to be an

unorthodox faculty: in quest of ‘really gifted teachers’ [, Leigh] would willingly sacrifice ‘traditional requirements regarding academic training, experience and research.’ Faculty would be sought among younger college teachers, some would be recruited from outside the academic compound, and the Ph.D., which had proved ‘to be an irrelevant standard for determining teaching effectiveness,’ would not influence appointments. (Brockway, 1981, p. 91)

The curriculum was to be intentionally and highly responsive: faculty were *not to announce* what they were planning to teach, but instead would develop titles and content for courses through open conversation with students, who made the rounds of interviews with each member of the faculty (Brockway, 1981, p. 69).

Opened in 2011, and then named in honor of President Emeritus and Founding Director of CAPA Elizabeth Coleman, the most recent new construction on campus, and the youngest of the areas of study for students is the Center for the Advancement of Public Action. Its mission is quite clear. CAPA endeavors to “educate undergraduate students in public action; to be a catalyst, convener, and creative space for social change; and to design solutions to the urgent social, political, and environmental problems of our time” (cited from the program’s website, 2023). This center lends itself—in some ways—to hiring practices similar to those the

college's founders envisioned. There are only two full-time faculty, both of them in hybrid teaching-directorial positions, whose course offerings are firmly and solely ensconced CAPA, and the 22 current other CAPA instructors are either co-appointed core Bennington faculty with interests that lend themselves to regular CAPA listings, graduate students in Public Action, or visiting faculty with wide ranging, often nonacademic, professional expertise. Most of these visitors join the faculty under short-term and rotating agreements, such that their offerings in aggregate allow CAPA to provide its promised education in responding to the urgent issues of our time.

Susan Sgorbati, the Director of CAPA and long-time member of the Bennington faculty, first in dance and later in mediation and related subjects, shared the program's perspectives and priorities in a recent interview. Under her directorship, Susan explained how CAPA's curricular offerings have remained agile, responsive to the current and emergent problems and issues of the world around and beyond Bennington. Through active outreach to potential intellectual mentors and role-models, many of them working full-time as community organizers or activists, Susan and her team develop curriculum around the pressing interests of students. Recently, these interests have included areas such as human rights and peacebuilding; the environment and correlated questions on sustainability in energy, water, and food systems; prison reform; free and fair elections, and democracy in crisis. For instance, in the Fall 2022 term, CAPA offered courses called, "Beyond Plastic Pollution," "Democracy in America, From the Revolution to Trump," "Practicum in Environmental Justice" and "Oral History for Social Change." It's worth noting briefly that, even in an experimental and progressive institution, this model for a "revolving door" has not been without skepticism and some controversy, as students have worked with faculty in relatively fleeting ways, and the curriculum was so mercurial that one often wonders if undergraduate students can put together and make sense of a rigorous and consistent program of study. That said, there have long been nontraditional faculty members at this school, and programs are intended to reflect the spirit of what a faculty member can do—not just what they are conventionally trained as experts in—to facilitate student development.

This practice of responsiveness has echoes in the earliest days of the college when, "Upon her arrival at college, each Freshman interviews one instructor from each of the four divisions. In this way she finds out about the work that is going on in each division and the instructor has the



opportunity of finding out what she wants to study, if anything, in his subject” (Fowlie, 1937, p. 97). Nowadays, the directors of CAPA also consider student interest in putting together a curriculum, but this is assessed before the moment of hiring faculty through short-term contracts, and not drawn out in conversation after the fact. In terms of the background and training of the faculty, Susan is similarly open in her outreach to people deeply immersed in the practice of public action, even if their formal scholarly education does not offer credentialing of that expertise. She finds that in considering a candidate for a position, she “always goes back to the mission of the program, and for CAPA this is responding to urgent problems in the world.” Her focus on offering a meaningful curriculum generally means inviting “people who are out doing the work in the world” to share their expertise and mentorship while truly embodying the role of the teacher-practitioner.

This builds on, but goes beyond the original format of hiring non-traditional faculty at the founding of Bennington, and what stands out now is that it goes against the current of faculty hiring in most other programs at the same school. All of the first cohort of faculty were hired for one-year appointments, “regardless of age or previous experience” (Leigh, 1930), and for the original group of faculty, the founding president, Robert Devore Leigh, had “no hesitation in appointing a considerable number of faculty who had neither attended nor taught in college” and most of them did not have doctorates (Brockway, 1981, p. 92). In fact, three of the original 16 faculty members had no bachelor’s degree (Brockway, 1981, p. 92). Fully 1/3 of the faculty 50 years later (1980–81) had no degree at all.

### AGILITY AND THE HIGHER EDUCATION LANDSCAPE

One worries, from a leadership role, if this agility and these short-term commitments to faculty in the current climate are a symptom of the “adjunctification” trends that many, including futurist Bryan Alexander, have noted in higher education, especially over the past two decades.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup>In *Academia Next*, Alexander (2020, Chap. 2) explains that “At some point in the first decade of the 21st C., the majority of American professors, became adjunct faculty. Rather than being tenured or on the tenure track, and instead of being tenureless but employed full-time under extended contract, the normative college or university instructor was a part-timer.”

Labor scholar Adriana Kezar's (2019) *Gig Economy* explains how academic labor has shifted over the past two decades from approximately 70 percent of professors being tenured or tenure track to 70 percent non-tenure track today. Dangers of an overreliance on adjuncts include the weakening of protections offered by tenure, stratification and resource inequality for adjuncts, lack of sustained access to mentors by students, and the political and economic devaluing of the academic labor (Brockway, 1981, pp. 37–38). One extreme and alarming case even pointed to the practice of attempting—and sometimes succeeding—to hire adjuncts for no compensation whatsoever (Hartocollis, 2002). Apart from that extreme case, the truth is that more and more college and university teaching is done by adjuncts, many of them with terminal degrees, and whose proven effectiveness in the classroom is belied by their lack of stability and difficult working conditions.

CAPA is trying to do something different. A strategy here, while not a solution to the broader structural problem, is to hire non-traditional faculty on short-term contracts. In these roles, specific academic credentials such as the PhD typically demanded of adjuncts are less crucial than the active embodiment of the teacher-practitioner model that Bennington and other like-minded schools have long espoused. This approach invites part-time employment largely by faculty who maintain their other paid positions. Visiting faculty in this model step in and out of their teaching roles, but continue to focus on the work “out in the world,” about which they teach. Unlike the adjuncts in Alexander’s discussion, for instance, these faculty are not part of the “majority of the majority” of faculty (i.e., faculty not on a tenure track) that relies on teaching as their primary source of income “as opposed to using teaching as an *adjunct* to other employment, which is the older model” (Alexander, 2020 citing AAUP’s 2018 survey). CAPA’s Director clarifies that the faculty she works with “offer something different than adjuncts. It’s not the same because they are often more focused on their projects, and they are able to bring this into the classroom, and then their work with students on these projects can be really substantial.”

The second major point Susan makes is that the center sees itself as an incubator for new work that sometimes takes on a life of its own. As a director, she seeks outside funding to support and try new initiatives, including a recently announced grant from the state of Vermont—\$2.2 million in shared earmarked funds—that allows the curriculum to more fully respond to the needs of the local community regarding food insecurity.

Streams of outside funding allow the center to experiment and propose new directions to see which of them take on a liveliness that might indicate the need for more sustained attention. However, the Director and other staff in CAPA also determine which issues they see as most urgent in the world in selecting in which areas they will seek grants. CAPA, by design, sets up a framework that allows for short-term decisions around hiring faculty who are “highly talented in their fields, offer something unique, and are able to participate precisely because of the flexibility and short-term commitments we offer them.” For example, one local community organizer and long-time scholar and practitioner of restorative justice, works with students inside and outside the classroom, while she continues to pursue her professional practice outside of the college as well.

Another option for offering curricular flexibility in CAPA is to promote cross-listing and co-teaching by the long-term faculty who mostly teach in other academic areas. Susan has found success in considering proposals from faculty across the college whose interests have moved beyond the specific content area where they were hired to teach. For instance, a faculty member hired to teach about environmental politics is also interested in the environmental causes and effects of forced migration, which has therefore become one of the focus areas in CAPA’s curriculum. Similarly, a member of the faculty who teaches translation also has an interest in the role of language in humanitarian efforts in conflict zones. These faculty from across the college are welcomed and supported by CAPA insofar as their new endeavors respond effectively to students’ and the community’s needs.

Drawing on her experience as a longtime and interdisciplinary faculty member, former dean, and now director, Susan explains that the thread that holds together all of the varied hiring practices is the overarching model of the Deweyan idea of the teacher-practitioner. Faculty should be practitioners not only of their own pedagogies, but also of the professional practice of the field in which they teach. This “field practice” should find productive synergy with classroom teaching, an idea that frequently means faculty at progressive institutions do work beyond the expected participation in their academic fields (discipline-specific conferences, publications, etc.).

Just as many progressive institutions require students to demonstrate their active engagement with their studies (often self-designed), they also require faculty to model this practice through active engagement as practitioners beyond the classroom. Two recent examples of how this plays out

in CAPA are those of an international human rights lawyer who is very active in her field, but who travels to Bennington whenever possible to impart 3-week module courses that continue to be impactful and popular with students. She could not be as active as a practitioner if she were to commit to longer stays at the college, but she could not teach in the way she does if she were to renounce her active engagement as an international human rights attorney. She notes, “For me having the chance to teach at Bennington on a short term basis is a unique opportunity to keep working in the field. [...Students also] enjoy learning through practice and in my case, looking at the UN through real situations and experiences. I could probably not teach at a college level if this was not on a temporary basis, so I appreciate this flexibility.” Likewise is the case of a Bosnian peace-builder, the cofounder of the Center for Peacebuilding in Bosnia and Herzegovina, who teaches in CAPA each year for three weeks without having to give up his work with the Center for Peacebuilding.

Always looking to improve, Susan points to some specific challenges with this model from the perspective of the students. For one, with a relatively fluid curriculum and faculty who largely come and go, students sometimes struggle to plan and execute their trajectories in a coherent manner. Second, the focus on the student as an individual in many progressive models presents challenges for community building beyond the level of particular classes as units (learning communities can happen more naturally in more tightly defined and sequential programs). There continues to be a sense that this center is somehow isolated from other academic disciplines, and some have at times wondered if the fluidity of the curriculum made it “a little loos-y goosy, overall,” as it prioritizes staying on the cutting edge of emerging issues, at the cost of consistency in approaches or methodologies.

### CSL: A DIFFERENT PRODUCT OF THE COLLEGE’S ORIGINS

A program at Bennington that takes a significantly different approach to supporting the same school’s mission is Cultural Studies and Languages. The history of this program, once known as the Isabelle Kaplan Center for Languages and Cultures, demonstrates a several-decades-long commitment to cultivating long-term—often decades long—faculty hires, even in an institution that renounces tenure. This long-term approach rests on the belief, sometimes contradictory to that of CAPA, that students need sustained and consistent mentorship to design and reflect upon their

learning, and faculty need sustained time, training, and resources to develop their own materials and the so-called soft skills needed to be engaged advisors and pedagogues. Academic advising is crucial here because students need guidance and role-models to learn to direct their own educations. It's essential to offer these students hands-on advising by faculty who can attend to their entire development, which faculty on brief contracts cannot do. Instructors who join and then depart a faculty are not the most effective mentors for the slow process of development of students' intellectual sophistication, which depends on sustained engagement and guidance. In contrast to the form of innovation outlined in the earlier section, CSL's approach is also in line with other early practices at Bennington College, where the founding faculty were not to have a system of tenure, but rather a commitment to progressively longer contracts as faculty developed, pursuant to factorable evaluations (Brockway, 1981, p. 89). Innovation comes from a steady cohort of faculty themselves, all deeply interdisciplinary by inclination and training, rather than from a revolving roster of varied faculty.

Furthermore, and as already mentioned, Cultural Studies and Languages evinces a commitment to faculty development and stability to make possible carefully crafted and scaffolded curricular trajectories for students. The attention to promoting and assessing student intellectual growth alongside their language skills, as described above, requires the coherent planning of a curriculum. Given the pedagogical complexity of such an enterprise, it would be impossible to accomplish if faculty were to come and go with the rhythm at which they do in CAPA, or if the faculty had competing commitments to another position.

In CSL in particular, development of a curriculum is tricky because most college language students' intellectual levels are at a mismatch from their linguistic levels, and many programs decide to "dumb down" what students are asked to think and talk about because of their limited vocabulary. Textbook publishers offer ample examples, and as Carol Meyer has written, "Traditionally within language programs, students are required to think in different ways depending on their language level" (Meyer, 2009, p. 3). Yet CSL asks faculty to support and push students' ethical and intellectual development even as they only slowly develop the language skills to match these. Unlike other language programs, CSL teaches courses—at every level and from the first day of class—through what in language pedagogy is called "authentic cultural content" or *realia*, a practice that

develops critical and intellectual acumen and cultural competency in step as language skills grow.

In practice, the skills that underpin CSL's approach to education take significant time to develop, to say nothing of the time needed to create the necessary and proprietary materials. To support students' entryways into this kind of coursework, faculty must also offer wide-ranging content options and stay abreast of—or push the envelope on—the latest research on language acquisition in addition to sustaining and deepening their own areas of scholarly work. This is not to suggest that faculty ignore current social and political trends either, as exemplified for instance in a recent course “#Stop Asian Hate,” focused on the rise in Asian hate crimes in the US as the COVID-19 pandemic took hold.<sup>5</sup> However, as responsive as the curriculum is in this example, it largely rests within the constraint of maintaining and continually developing the range of expertise of the faculty in their current positions. Maintaining and supporting a stable cadre of faculty can often be more resource-efficient than holding a revolving door for them as well.

In a recent interview, two CSL faculty spoke about their approaches to the curriculum and their experiences, honed over many years, of engaging with pedagogy research and practice in dialogue with their other scholarly work.<sup>6</sup> In fact, the original Deweyan use of the phrase teacher-practitioner, so central at Bennington, used to mean that faculty were to be reflecting, discussing, and sharing out what they were learning about their innovative classroom practices and pedagogies, and not their work in the field, and nowhere at Bennington is this sense of the word more in the mix more than in CSL.

Whereas most language programs structure the introduction of new material in a very predictable and consumeristic way, such as shopping for clothing in a mall, which contradicts the experience out in the “real world,” Jonathan, a faculty member since 2004 in Spanish and Latin American Studies, explains that for CSL, experiential learning is essential.

<sup>5</sup> See course description at <https://curriculum.bennington.edu/fall2021/2021/03/26/stop-asian-hate-making-an-action-against-hate/>.

<sup>6</sup> CSL faculty have only been recognized as full faculty members at Bennington since the closing of the Regional Center for Languages and Cultures in 2003. Prior to this time, the RCLC asked faculty to teach at the college level and also at local grade schools. This ushered in a period of more “traditional” hires of faculty with doctoral degrees and scholarly research activity.

This, he says, is precisely because we can't control what's going to happen beyond the classroom, and therefore too much curation doesn't fully prepare students to adapt and adjust to the dynamic worlds in which these languages and cultural contexts live. Jonathan highlights, as well, the value of student agency and notes that, compared to some programs with a more open (and "DIY") curriculum, across the Spanish curriculum, there's significant scaffolding and planning so that students have consistent and individualized challenges to develop the sophistication of their critical skills and content knowledge. In other words, the classroom environment is dynamic and fluid, focused on sophisticated intellectual content, but the overarching curriculum is coherent and logical.

Relative to CAPA, this degree of challenge offers greater support for developing students' linguistic skills and intercultural competency, and therefore, Jonathan notes, we can certify and "recommend students to the 'big wide world' without any qualms, knowing they've gone through a consistent program," a program that has, in fact, already been a reflection of that big wide world. Both Jonathan and Ikuko, a Japanese faculty member since 1998, offer a graduated approach to teaching students. Ikuko spoke about offering instruction, not only in teaching cultural and linguistic skills, but also in cultivating the habits of self-assessment by which students take accountability for their own work. For instance, in a program that she oversees, and which places students in teaching positions in local public schools, Ikuko monitors all of the students' lesson plans in detail at the outset, and then teaches the participants, little by little, to assess not only their own plans, but those of their more novice peers. She clarifies that it takes an "expert eye" to assess the students' progress and learning, and she trains the students over several semesters to become these experts. Ikuko adds that students who are open to this supported and graduated level of freedom and responsibility end up taking their advanced work very seriously, going deeply and reflectively into groundbreaking and truly interdisciplinary projects that one seldom sees at the undergraduate level. Ikuko and Jonathan's experience has been that a student-directed education teaches students to say something original and interesting by the time they graduate (i.e., students develop real critical thinking skills). Students with more agency are more proactive in other areas of their life, including their active engagement with being informed and participating in politics, a longtime goal of progressive colleges.

Likewise, colleagues and administrators, myself included, work hard to offer a hands-on and reflective approach to mentoring and supporting new faculty toward the objective of developing future experts like Jonathan and Ikuko. I offer a year-long series of meetings where new faculty ask questions and share their own strategies to address the teaching and learning needs of the community. Unlike in CAPA, CSL faculty and other “permanent” faculty members also spend a great deal of time reflecting on their own progress and development in writing and in discussion with each other and with college leaders, a reflective process which is in fact a major component of our performance review. The aforementioned engagement with the local community also points to something essential about the program overall, an aspect that takes years to develop and fully understand on the part of the faculty: namely, studying cultures and languages as intertwined elements of human identity encourages the development of empathy, an essential component of socially engaged post-graduate life.

Students who study languages and cultures as intertwined are practicing and developing intercultural skills while also experiencing the (sometimes humbling) position of one who does not yet have the language skills to meet their intellectual sophistication. Furthermore, as Carol Meyer explains, “Learning a language is a long-term process and learning to both communicate and think from the start requires students to trust in the process even more than they would otherwise have to” (2009, p. 17). Cultural competency, in this context, demands that students learn how to say something “real” and culturally relevant/comprehensible from within the “target” language and cultural setting from the very beginning. Jonathan and Ikuko both spoke about how intentional they are in creating an environment where students are genuinely curious and supportive of each other’s development, willing to learn from each other. Precisely because the CSL faculty teach for such a long time, they are able to reassess and adjust curriculum and approaches based on their own reflective practices, on the latest research about language pedagogies, and/or on the changing political environment in which we are asking our students to become informed and active participants. Ikuko, whose scholarly work centers on language pedagogy, notes that in CSL:

There are regular conversations about language pedagogies, and a shared sense of our pedagogical approach because we have time to pay attention to where language education is going, what’s next and new, and can consider



as a group whether or not to include new approaches. We all read each other's course descriptions and know quite a bit about each other's specialties and expertise so we can keep an eye on students as well as shifts in the program as a whole.

## CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

To be innovative in service of student learning, schools must be willing to experiment with hiring nontraditional faculty, yet also commit to training and supporting excellent faculty as an institutional investment over the long haul, and both can make sense pedagogically in the service of a consistent institutional mission. In fact, what should be striking from these examples is that a singular school, consistent and self-aware in its mission and priorities, can still contain multiple and contradictory approaches. These two programs show how a school can tolerate tension and uncertainty without sacrificing the value of the education they provide for students. In other words, innovation may require a school to withstand apparent contradictions in service of the recognition that one size never does truly fit all.

Innovative pedagogy demands innovative faculty, and if we're not structuring schools with an emphasis on recruitment, training, and retention of these faculty, we're missing the whole point. Unfortunately, in an effort to increase "efficiencies," many institutions choose the short-cut of adjunctification, leaning on traditionally certified but scholars with unreliable contracts, rather than investing deeply in professional development and mentorship. Other so-called innovative practices, new buildings, new technology is a waste if we're not paying attention to the faculty who deliver on the promise of the mission of any quality college: educating students. Some of the considerations raised here should be useful to other institutions, not just progressive and non-traditional ones, and not just small and agile ones, but any institutions that are considering programmatic changes or the aligning of priorities around faculty hiring.

What's interesting is how different the commitment to bringing in true teacher-practitioners can look, and how both of these practices serve the stated purpose of developing student ideals such as informed and skills participation in a complex world. While other institutions must make decisions in service of their own priorities and missions, all schools should endeavor to support both the professional class of educators that students

need to benefit from meaningful mentorships and guidance, and those doing real work and inspiring in the world beyond the institution.

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# Innovative Scheduling: The Intensive Delivery of Higher Education

*Christian Gilde*

## INTRODUCTION

There are different, innovative models of scheduling in higher education. These models cater to the growing demand for a more flexible delivery of learning and operational efficiency. One of these models is intensive scheduling of classes (i.e., a “block plan” format for one-course-at-a-time delivery) an example of which is presented in a later case study that has been adopted in a more traditional institution, The University of Montana Western. This delivery mode requires students to complete a single course in a compressed format. Over the years, this approach has gained increasing popularity because it provides students with greater scheduling-mobility, lets students focus on their studies, and allows students to work closely with the instructor and fellow classmates. This model also challenges the traditional, siloed nature of university teaching. However, to be successful, the delivery of compressed courses requires considerable

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resources and customized materials, as well as a continued commitment to student-centered learning across an institution.

Dating back to the middle of the twentieth century, there is a small but useful body of literature that studies intensive higher education courses. And even though the literature is not extensive (e.g., evidence about block teaching), one can observe that more and more scholarly and practitioner articles, reports, and dissertations are being published on this topic (Richardson, 2005). Despite the variety of subjects that are addressed in the intensive teaching literature, the quality and impact of compressed teaching schedules are of great importance in the scholarship of teaching and learning (Kasworm, 2001). A considerable number of existing studies, some of which are discussed throughout this chapter, suggest that intensive formats are at least as good as if not better than the traditional approach for student learning. Given the growing popularity of intensive teaching formats, existing research has to move away from using the same pedagogical lenses for semester and accelerated course delivery and develop its own practice and body of knowledge.

The following chapter explores the nature and functionality of the intensive format of instruction and discusses and compares different modes of time-compressed courses. In addition, the chapter discusses the learning environment that this approach of delivery creates, taking a closer (critical) look at the effectiveness of the accelerated model via a more detailed discussion of the literature. Furthermore, the chapter offers a case study of a particular institution—The University of Montana Western—that has abandoned the traditional scheduling format of semester course schedules, adopting instead this innovative format of intensive scheduling. In general, the work seeks to define the features of intensive teaching and distinguish this form of delivery from traditional course formats.

### INTENSIVE SCHEDULING: A PAST

Innovations do not happen in a vacuum, as ideas and structures move through and between institutions. However, innovations are difficult to spread across schools and academia because they can disrupt established routines and ask administrators and faculty to take risks beyond what they might find comfortable. Heck (2016) writes that many institutions “give lip-service to the concept of innovation in mission statements, on web-sites, in PDs (professional development), and during committee, council,

and board meetings, but lose their nerve when it's time to make it happen" (para. 15).

In the literature of innovation theory, the phrase "disruptive" is associated, in part, with the notion of disruptive innovations, which Clayton Christensen (1997) outlines in his book *The Innovator's Dilemma*. Christensen observes that disruptive innovations often enter at the bottom of the market, where established organizations ignore them. From this starting point, their influence grows to the extent where they surpass the old systems. In other words, innovations are disruptive in that they radically change the whole field (Christensen & Overdorf, 2000; Yu & Hang, 2010). Christensen and Eyring (2011), who wrote about disruptive innovations that force universities to change, predict that teaching in the future will be disrupted in different ways. Intensive scheduling is one of these disruptive developments.

During the Second World War, the United States and the British military developed intensive language programs for soldiers in order to support the War effort (Buzash, 1994). Following this model, schools developed the compressed teaching framework to enable students to focus more intensively on a single topic or subject. In addition to summer-, interim-, and modular scheduling, in the early 1970s, weekend colleges began to proliferate and experienced noticeable growth (Allen & Voytek, 2017).

Courses that are labeled as intensive include different formats, such as five successive full days or three hours a day for 18 days. The literature also discusses less intensive scheduling formats, such as two to three weekly classes of three hours for five to ten weeks. The common denominator of these intensive programs appears to be that a set number of class-hours is delivered in a concentrated sequence, compared to the traditional model of classes which meets once or twice a week. In essence, accelerated education condenses the educational format experienced in the quarter or semester system that is employed by most colleges. Intensive learning is also called accelerated, compressed, concentrated, block, or short-term learning (see Davies, 2006; Serdyukov, 2008). Since there is no clear distinction in the literature between these terms and the research has a hard time delineating these labels, this chapter uses them interchangeably, consistent with Gose (1995) and Grant (2001).

Short-term course formats and intensive learning programs employ specially organized course structures and intensify learning to produce employable knowledge and skills, without compromising academic

quality. Davies (2006) compared 17 studies and found that 12 reported no noticeable difference between traditional and intensive formats as far as learning outcomes are concerned. Tatum (2010) advances that to deeply explore a topic/discipline is more fruitful in a short, intensive class without the distraction from other courses. When explaining the dimensions and subtleties of intensive learning, Marques (2012) reminds teachers and administrators that a rethinking of the standard teaching philosophy is needed to be able to operate intensive courses. This requires a deliberate design of intensive classes, including supporting pre-class preparation by students, encouraging student self-study, providing timely feedback for assignments, and monitoring and helping students who struggle.

One institution that experimented early in moving its entire academic program onto a compressed scheduling format was Colorado College. Via its “Block Plan,” Colorado College required that all of its courses run one at a time on a three-hour-per-day, three-and-a-half week format. Since launching this model in the 1970s (Colorado College, 2023b; Freeman et al., 2020), it has evolved and been adopted elsewhere (at times even exclusively adopted), including at Quest University and Victoria University. Colorado College did not adopt the block approach to follow a trend in higher education, follow an administrative vision, or respond to a financial rough patch. In the second half of the twentieth century, there was a time of disruption and national rethinking during which Colorado College and many other colleges and universities were asked to move away from summative assessment and update their outdated curricula (Colorado College, 2023b). The innovative block system is synonymous with one-class-at-a-time and favors hands-on learning.

Following this disruptive and focused learning approach from Colorado College, Quest University in Canada adopted a similar block model for its entire academic program in 2007. The academic leadership of the Institution deemed that immersive classroom experiences and student-centered learning would be delivered by this scheduling structure (see chapter “[When Innovative Institutions Fail: Quest University, Partnerships, Financial Sustainability](#)” of this volume). The Institution designed its block plan in a cross-disciplinary manner that encourages real-world learning and classroom application. This design produced an innovative curriculum within the block system that centers around questions rather than majors, a final senior project, and awards a bachelor in art and science degree that is based on these principles. After two years of taking courses across the arts and sciences, students self-design a concentration program

for their final two years, which is structured around a comprehensive question they explore (see chapter “[When Innovative Institutions Fail: Quest University, Partnerships, Financial Sustainability](#)” of this volume). Faculty members assume the role of tutors rather than professors with research agendas. This shows the Institution’s deep commitment to its educational values. More detailed conversations about Quest University and its innovative, experiential approach to learning can be found in the chapter by Jeff R. Warren in this edited collection.

However, Quest was not the only institution, in recent times, that believed in the transformative education of students by disrupting the traditional semester system. In 2016, Victoria University in Australia adopted the Colorado College block model for its courses as an institution with 30,000 students. It was the first time that a large institution adopted the model on a wide scale. Victoria University implemented an institutionally transformative vision for the first-year experience that reconceptualizes the design of first year courses in order to focus on students’ academic and professional needs (Ambler et al., 2021) and address retention, student-satisfaction, graduation, and enrollment issues. This approach departs from the traditional large lectures to smaller interactive classes and attempts to make it easier for students to transition from high school to university, adapt to the learning at a tertiary institution, find a better balance between their study and leisure time, and become more active learners (Kift, 2009).

Looking at these schools from a broader perspective, such institutions can be considered as laboratories (incubators) willing to experiment at an institutional level, where students take an active part through learning by doing (see, e.g., chapter “[Agility or Stability: Can a School Have Both in Faculty Hiring?](#)” in this volume). Having now introduced and defined the intensive mode of teaching and its innovative characteristics along with some examples, the following section explores different formats of time-compressed courses.

## DIFFERENT MODES OF TIME-COMPRESSED COURSES

Davies (2006) points out that the nature of compressed courses/programs/schedules can vary substantially. Possibly the most prevalent format of these are summer sessions, which usually are scheduled for four to ten weeks. Davies (2006) highlights the following time-shortened approaches to teaching in his work and, frequently, identifies corresponding research: (a) Weekend formats (meeting three, six, or nine times

throughout a semester); (b) evening formats (a combination of weekend and evening courses); (c) week-long formats (Clark & Clark, 2000; Grant, 2001); (d) Two or three week-long formats (Petrowsky, 1996; van Scyoc & Gleason, 1993); and (e) other formats like the one-month block (Gose, 1995).

Some of the corresponding, quantitative research provides a more complete picture of the different intensive scheduling approaches and their successes and failures. A recent survey offers some insight into the pervasiveness and characteristics of intensive delivery models in higher education. Male et al. (2016) investigated 26 institutions and received feedback from 105 curriculum schedulers and discovered that 52% of intensive classes were taught at the undergraduate and graduate level. Although the number and frequency of the occurrence for each model was not explicitly stated, the study found that intensive models featured one of the following (Male et al., 2016):

- Two full days of classes following online preparation
- One-week period of classes
- Two, three, or four weeks of medium-intensity classes
- Five half days of courses over a full semester
- A full day of classes once a week for seven weeks

Scott and Conrad (1992) explain how the current demand for accelerated courses and programs originates from recent developments in the higher education sector, such as refresher classes, weekend modules, and leveling courses. All of these accelerated units operate by using the compressed delivery of classes without sacrificing educational quality (Kasworm, 2001). In the context of their research, Scott and Conrad (1992) highlighted several types of intensive courses, which are summarized in the following paragraphs.

- **Summer Sessions**

Studies reviewed by Scott and Conrad (1992) indicate that there is no significant difference between the academic achievement in summer sessions and longer programs. However, research by Petrowsky (1996) found mixed results when investigating two-week and 15-week long macroeconomics classes. Exam scores for the intensive classes were higher than for the longer classes when the content required knowledge acquisition, but scores were lower for



the shorter classes when the classes focused on analysis and application. An example of a summer session is Boston College's summer management catalyst, which is an eight-week residential program that allows students to take courses in accounting, marketing, and finance, and earn 11 credits for their successful participation (Boston College, 2022).

- **Interim Sessions**

The interim session gets its name from being sandwiched between the fall and spring semesters (offered in January) while running for two to four weeks. One such example is the two-week University of Virginia January-Term. During this interim program, embedded in a regular 4-1-4 months' academic year schedule (fall semester-January term- spring semester), students meet for five hours a day from Monday through Friday and earn three credits (University of Virginia, January Term, 2022). The findings in the literature on the effectiveness of this format are varied (e.g., Allen et al., 1982). Studies nonetheless confirm that interim sessions are similarly effective to the traditional semester format, including Geltner and Logan (2001).

- **Weekend Courses**

Weekend courses are mostly designed to meet the needs of adult learners who have to work during the week or have family commitments but are willing to give up weekends to advance their education. There are different weekend formats, and some of these formats are very intense (e.g., 40 hours of instruction in two weekends). And, sometimes accelerated courses are taken concurrently with regular courses. Such highly compressed schedules raise concerns regarding the performance of students. For instance, Williams (1992) compared classes that subscribe to a two-weekend, 8-week, and 15-week schedule. There were no differences in grades among the classes. Messina (1996) also found that there was no difference in semester grades for students enrolled in weekend courses and regular courses at a community college. Furthermore, Messina (1996) reported that the students taking weekend courses indicated they learn the same or more as when they take traditional courses. An example of a weekend program is the Rutgers' University social work weekend-program, where classes meet one weekend a month on Saturday and Sunday from 9 am to 5 pm over a two-month period (Rutgers Schools of Social Work, MSW Program Options, 2022).

- **Modular Systems**

The modular system represents a schedule structure in which accelerated classes are offered one-class-at-a-time in succession of, possibly, varying class-lengths and intensities. In many cases, the modular system is offered in addition to the traditional system. Some colleges and universities teach whole programs exclusively as a modular system (e.g., Lynn University, Randolph College, Culver-Stockton College). In a study, researchers compared undergraduate courses that are offered in a compressed format with the same courses offered in a traditional semester-program at Regis University (Wlodkowski & Westover, 1999). They found just minor differences in how students perceived the programs, but positive differences in student performance in favor of the intensive program. In this context, one rendition of a modular program is The University of Montana Western block plan, during which students take one class at a time for 18 instructional days (3-hour class per day) within a three-and-a-half-week period (The University of Montana Western, 2022a).

Following the previous categorization of intensive teaching modes is a discussion of the learning environment that needs to be in place for this modality of course delivery.

### THE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT OF INTENSIVE SCHEDULING

A learning environment includes all internal and external influences that impact education. Especially in the context of the intensive mode of delivery, the learning environment has different forces and actors that are within as well as outside the institutions. By considering these environmental elements, institutions of higher education adopting an intensive mode of course delivery can adapt their strategies to effectively meet the challenges and opportunities facing today's learners.

The following are several significant educational factors that must be considered carefully in order to set up an effective learning environment using a compressed schedule format:

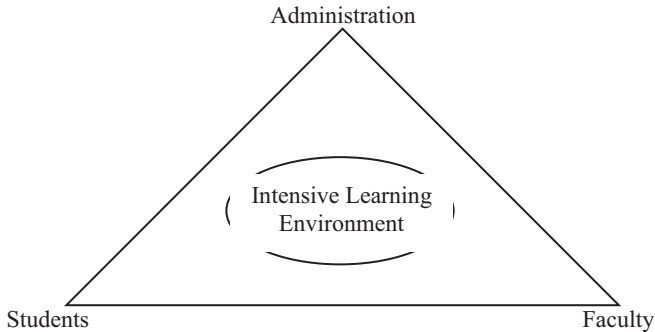
- **Administrative forces:** When employing the intensive mode of delivery, schools have to design their institutional culture and instructional philosophy around this mode. This scheduling philosophy also has to align with the resources that the administration allocates to

enable intensive teaching. In this context, the political environment can be hard to predict as it is influenced by institutional administrations, legal regulations, government agencies, lobbying groups, and the local public. Employing intensive approaches means that institutions have to adjust their policies, rethink their teaching and learning, and be innovative with their content delivery.

- **Student forces:** With different trends, students develop different tastes for how they want to have their education offered, one of which is the intensive mode of delivery. Typically, students who buy into the intensive mode want to focus more on their studies, enjoy involved learning, prefer flexibility and convenience, and seek experiential/hands-on learning (Male et al., 2016). Compared to traditional formats, this approach (more involved format) motivates students to perform and makes it easier for students to build communities (Swain, 2016). With experiential learning, students become active learners who are able to locate what they need, when they need it, from the given information (Neill, 1970) and apply rather than regurgitate knowledge. In addition, for intensive teaching, the faculty has to consider the student needs if a class delivery is in-person, hybrid, or online and the role technology plays in this context.
- **Faculty forces:** This compressed schedule structure can produce an immersive, focused, connected, and, therefore, a more intense learning experience for students and faculty alike (Fenesi et al., 2018). Students and faculty can both cherish the option to focus on one subject at a time, engage in deep learning of the subject, and undertake experiential (applied) learning. The experiential nature of the intensive classroom encourages faculty to vary teaching techniques to maintain student interest and participation with hands-on projects, in-class discussions, excursions, and internships (Martin & Culver, 2009). Since, on average, the intensive mode of delivery has a higher workload for faculty (Lutes & Davies, 2018), this time- and resource-commitment of the accelerated approach must fit a faculty member's academic lifestyle and compensation expectations.

Figure 1 depicts these forces that create the intensive learning environment and shape the compressed delivery of an institution.

All these different components of the intensive learning environment (see Fig. 1) can be, to a certain extent, represented by stakeholders, such as students, faculty, staff, administrators, accreditation agencies, state



**Fig. 1** The main forces of the intensive learning environment

governments, and the public, who play a part in a university's well-being. Stakeholder theory defines the university as a number of relationships among constituencies who have a vested interest in the operations of the university and its success (Freeman, 1984). This becomes especially important when teaching through the intensive mode since, for instance, students and professors develop and operate through close-knit relationships.

Looking at the bigger picture, there are noticeable differences in the learning environments of intensive and traditional formats (Adelman & Reuben, 1984; Allen et al., 1982; Kirby-Smith, 1987). For intensive formats, the teaching quality depends much more on the instructor and how the course delivery is designed (Finger & Penney, 2001). Scott and Conrad (1992) find that with intensive formats, teachers were less likely to lecture and more likely to encourage group and student discussions which, in turn, promotes more time spent on learning, practical application of knowledge, problem solving, and motivation to learn (McKeachie et al., 2010).

The previous discussion of the basic elements of the intensive teaching environment raises an important question: are accelerated schedules an effective mode of teaching? This question is explored in the upcoming section.

## EFFECTIVENESS OF TIME-COMPRESSED COURSES

A complete and current literature on the effectiveness of time-compressed formats is missing. The existing work suggests that advantages of intensive formats can be educational (pedagogy and curriculum) and operational (programs and courses). Following are some of the educational advantages this approach offers. These findings highlight that delivery mode is only one factor, so it is necessary to consider other features of the curriculum.

In the Male et al. (2016) study, which produced a good practice guide for accelerated teaching, the benefits discovered in the intensive model included a strong learning community, increased immersion, continuous learning, real-world applications, and increased teacher–student interaction. Students reported they enjoyed connecting and learning with peers, focusing on a single unit, applying and practicing the material, and using authenticity and hands-on activities. The study by Male et al. (2016) also revealed that the intensive experience attempts to increase first-year student engagement, success, and retention.

When surveying the current literature and the *Intensive Mode Teaching Guide* (Male et al., 2016) about student feedback on these timetabling approaches and viewing these innovative scheduling models from a student perspective, the following comments stand out. Students like to learn interactively through simulations, excursions, and guest speakers, and thus engage in experiential learning. Students also enjoy learning from peers through group activities and are encouraged by their group members to stay on track. Many students really appreciate the opportunity to focus on one subject and specific topic(s) at a time. Due to increasing professional and school-time demands on the current student population, students find it very helpful to be able to manage their time more efficiently and receive timely feedback on work submitted. In addition, students take advantage of the fact that they can connect theory and practice and, therefore, experience real-world applications.

Assessing the effectiveness of this model has consistently shown positive outcomes for student perception and learning. For example, an investigation of the Colorado College block (courses are offered in 3½-week blocks) by McJimsey (1995) revealed high levels of satisfaction with the block from students, faculty, and alumni. Compared to similarly classified private colleges, Colorado College students saw noticeable improvements in writing, problem solving, and oral presentation. In a related context,

Tatum and Parker (2007) at National University compared three courses in psychology (developmental, personality, and psychopathology) taught in four weeks sequentially as well as offered during a 12-week period in parallel. The researchers found no difference in grades or exam scores, but the students' perception in the sequential courses was more favorable. Finally, Vaughan and Carlson (1992) undertook a detailed investigation of the One-Course-At-A-Time (OCAAT) structure at Cornell College and discovered more benefits of this system compared to the semester-system previously used at the College. They found high student and faculty satisfaction, improved student performance, and a positive alumni assessment of the college experience.

Daniel (2000) reports that some of the disadvantages of compressed teaching are stress, fatigue, and time pressures. Among the more pronounced criticisms of the intensive mode of teaching are that this format provides limited time to study and think about the taught material (Traub, 1997; Wolfe, 1998), forces students to mindlessly prepare (Shafer, 1995), encourages cursory coverage of the content by instructors (Wlodkowski, 2003), promotes the commodification of education (Traub, 1997), and does not adequately meet the learning outcomes (Shafer, 1995).

Scott and Conrad (1992) identified several unresolved issues with respect to learning outcomes and the effectiveness of accelerated education. To a certain extent, there seems to be a lack of the following in accelerated education: Balancing the short-term versus long-term teaching objectives; accounting for the degree of intensity of this mode; considering varying deliveries of material in different disciplines; paying attention to the different learning-levels of students; and monitoring course withdrawal and degree completion rates.

Having discussed the advantages and disadvantages of the compressed mode in the context of effectiveness, the next section introduces some of the author's own experiences with the block plan and takes a closer look at a particular example of a learning environment that uses intensive scheduling, namely, the University of Montana Western (UM Western).

## THE INTENSIVE MODE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA WESTERN

One of the intensive modes of delivery, block teaching, is defined as “a daily schedule that is organized into larger blocks of time (more than 60 minutes) to allow for a diversity of instructional activities” (Cawelti, 1994, p. 2). The block is structured so that classes are taught in sequence and do not have parallel running units such as the traditional semester system. I have been teaching in the block-mode for 14 years at the University of Montana Western (UM Western) with an emphasis on commerce education, including classes on management, marketing, and leadership. Based on my experience with the block, I feel that authentic learning in the discipline is at the heart of block education. However, it seems to be a challenge to incorporate meaningful real-world experiences into the intensive classroom. At times, doubts crossed my mind about whether the block and its experiential learning really works. This is especially true, since even though UM Western has committed professors who embrace experiential learning and small classes sizes, the institution operates on very limited resources. Following the theme of experiential learning, many of my classroom activities are informed by projects and exercises that string specific topics throughout a class. Teaching in this one-course-at-a-time model, I can more easily connect with my students. However, I also need to manage the intense experience of this form of schedule delivery, for both myself and my students. Over time I have come to realize that careful planning not only of what to include in a class session but also how to structure that material is of the essence for the accelerated approach.

Starting as a faculty member at UM Western made me feel I was part of something innovative and special; something that disrupts and revolutionizes higher education as we know it. Having taken short-term, summer, and J-Term classes and compressed professional workshops, I was never really lost or found myself out of place. The block was a natural fit for my teaching aspirations, and I like the focused instruction I can undertake without having competing pressures, such as other classes, class-length limitations, or overly distracted students. Since teaching on the block, returning to the lecture and semester format would be, for me, a step backward in time and professional development.

This raises the question: How does the UM Western block model work? UM Western is a small public institution with approximately 1300 students. It has used a block model for course delivery for close to two

decades (The University of Montana Western, Institutional Research, 2022c). Students take one class at a time for 18 teaching days (three hours a day), which is worth four credits (The University of Montana Western Experience One, 2022a). UM Western calls this deep-learning, one-class-at-a-time delivery Experience One and identifies this approach as a vital element of the institution's purpose for existence. Before Experience One began in 2005, UM Western hit a low-point in its full-time equivalency (FTE) student units and was struggling (Thomas, 2014). After Experience One was implemented, there was a noticeable increase in institutional enrollment (Storey et al., 2014).

A part of this method is experiential learning which exposes students to hands-on, competency-based learning in their discipline, one subject at a time. Experiential learning at UM Western assumes many different forms, such as in-class and out-of-class projects, in-person excursions, computer-based simulations, planned group work, and internships. This kind of intensive experiential learning is similar to experiential learning in the Marlboro Program that Emerson College offers which has approachable faculty, comprehensive projects, and focused, individualized coursework (see chapter “[Webs of Connection and Moments of Friction: Dynamics of Ownership and Relationship Between Students and Faculty at a Small Innovative College](#)” in this volume). Many students take four block courses per semester which awards a total of 16 credits (each course is worth four credits). A few classes ask students to acquire skills that take longer to explain and learn and are, therefore, taught over the whole semester (The University of Montana Western Registration, 2022b). By adopting the block in the early 2000s, UM Western did not just rethink its approach to scheduling and change its curriculum delivery but also reflect on its overall purpose (Experience One) and the value proposition of its teaching.

However, despite these successes, the UM Western block model also faces some challenges, such as the following: (a) Running the compressed nature of the block frequently causes operational and administrative tensions; (b) lobbying for State funding for this intensive model of learning is difficult due to the time-commitment and resources needed; and (c) recruiting of faculty and administrators that are willing to adapt to the block-system and experiential learning can be difficult (Mock, 2005). Similar challenges have been reported by an experiential institution featured in this book, Bennington College, which are centered around the struggle of faculty hiring. It can be difficult to hire faculty who align with



Bennington's ideals of innovation, change, and pedagogy (see chapter "Agility or Stability: Can a School Have Both in Faculty Hiring?" in this volume).

Daniel (2000) reports that a number of courses from different disciplines, including those within education as well as business, could be appropriately taught in a time-shortened format. Teaching these courses in flexible or structured blocks of time does seem to be an educational design that provides more benefits than just offering students more convenient schedule options or disciplinary focus. It also allows the dissemination of high-quality education through different modes of studying in different disciplines.

For instance, education majors took General Special Education Programming using different accelerated formats (Lombardi et al., 1992). Those in two-week and three-week courses had better assessment results than those in five- and 15-week courses; in addition, when compared to the regular semester courses, these students indicated that they learned the same or more in the intensive courses (Lombardi et al., 1992). In the same vein, the Education Department at UM Western offers similar experiences, such as two-week (structured) cultural immersion trips and school residentials that allow students to gain practical skills.

Courses involving quantitative skills such as business, mathematics, economics, and some sciences can also be successfully delivered in an accelerated manner. Researchers who studied intensive courses involving quantitative analyses, including Caskey (1994), found that courses in both accounting and college algebra could work in a time-shortened format. Earth science instructor Waechter (1966) discovered that students in a compressed-format course compared to a long-term course had similar test scores. Faculty in language and literature courses have also reported positive outcomes in utilizing a time-shortened format (Buzash, 1994; Scott & Conrad, 1992). In this context, UM Western successfully offers accounting and business statistics classes in compressed format and sees good student completion and satisfaction rates. Also, UM Western has classes, such as college algebra, in the accelerated mode and experiences noticeable successes through experiential and skill-based learning in this area.

The next section will focus on the future opportunities this method of instruction can offer.

## FUTURE OPPORTUNITIES FOR INTENSIVE SCHEDULING

A few variations of intensive scheduling formats seem to be relatively special in their design and execution. Therefore, the following paragraphs will report on some of these unique applications in this disruptive timetabling movement in higher education.

Thematically (even project-wise or assessment-wise) linking intensive courses has seen various applications at schools that use the accelerated mode. When creating these connected learning experiences, one has to pay particular attention to their pedagogical underpinnings, planning, implementation, and outcomes. Of special interest would be whether this curriculum improves the learning outcomes of students and teaching experience of faculty.

For instance, UM Western has employed an immersive block schedule for close to two decades in which students take a single class at a time for 18 teaching days, and (frequently) enroll in four consecutive blocks within a given semester. Currently, the Business and Technology Department at UM Western is developing an integrated block model, which will link four business-core classes together and will utilize a team-teaching approach and comprehensive learning management system. Classes, such as management, marketing, operations management, and finance, will overlap

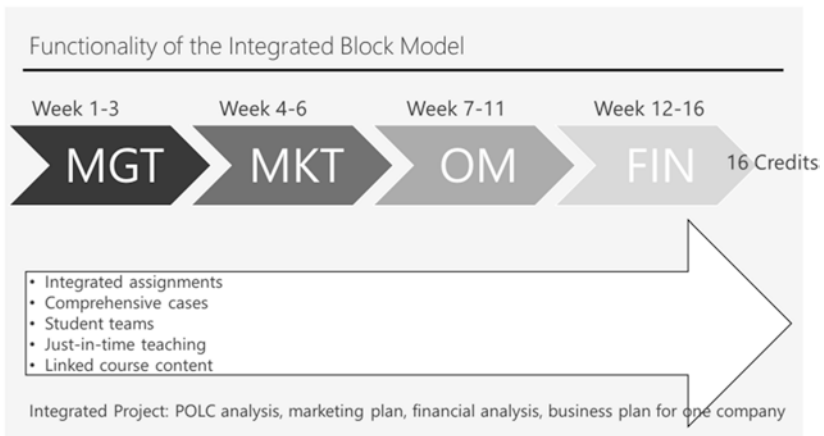


Fig. 2 Curriculum design of the integrated block model

and be taught in sequence by a team of instructors (see Fig. 2). This integrated block structure allows students to work with a faculty team that wants to help the students understand the cross-functional nature of business operations and decisions. The faculty members that teach on the integrated block approach business-challenges from a variety of viewpoints and employ a variety of problem-solving tools, therefore contributing to a comprehensive business understanding of students.

The classes will be linked with certain assignments and course content and will utilize an overarching project to tie these discipline-related subjects together. This setup bridges business functions, offers very interactive instruction, and takes advantage of immersive student work and schedules. The integrated block experience is a one-semester plan which awards 16 credits for four classes. The structure highlights topics and skills often ignored in the disjointed, semester-long course delivery. The integrated block (see Fig. 2) also seems to reduce content overlaps and redundancies, as well as the artificial constraints imposed by the traditional and compartmentalized business curriculum. In addition, the integrated block experience emphasizes the development of overarching analytical, strategic, and behavioral skills, such as creativity, communication, collaboration, critical thinking, adaptability, functional expertise, and result-production, that address real business problems and projects.

The first time a version of the integrated block structure was attempted in the Business and Technology area was a few years after UM Western implemented the block plan in 2005. At this time, the approach followed a cohort model by chaperoning a cohort of students through a semester-long sequence of linked business classes. Unfortunately, this integrated structure was abandoned due to, at the time, a considerable commitment of time, resources, and planning. However, with more block experience accrued over the years and a sound pedagogical foundation resurrecting this model presents itself as a viable path forward.

This example of course delivery suggests that integrated blocks as well as intensive scheduling can be unique in their delivery, experiential in their nature, and effective in their outcomes.

Another innovation that emerged from intensive scheduling in the Business and Technology Department at UM Western are “pods.” UM Western’s pods were designed along the line of Colorado College half-blocks. In the case of Colorado College, the half-block is an intensive 10-day course which awards half the regular course credit. This design provides students with the opportunity to explore courses outside of their

regular major, or to work closely with a faculty member to research more thoroughly a subject matter that interests them and for which they already have foundational coursework (Colorado College, 2023a).

Another source for the pod idea was the two-week residential periods employed in a number of masters programs. For instance, the Trium MBA, offered by New York University, HEC Paris, and London Business School, organizes several two-week modules around the world. In this environment, one of the program's two-week modules is in Asia which offers an immersive experience and places the participants in a real business setting, an experience that goes beyond the classroom (Trium Global Executive MBA, 2023). Another two-week module in Europe provides a venue for applied learning by allowing the students to propose, explore, and define new business opportunities in a setting that is influenced by international cultural, behavioral, and political dynamics.

<i>Time</i>	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY
<i>Theme of the Day</i>	<i>Marketing</i>	<i>Accounting and Finance</i>	<i>Operations</i>	<i>Strategy</i>	<i>Business Plan</i>
8:00-8:30	Introduction	Review Previous Day	Review Previous Day	Review Previous Day	Review Previous Day
8:30-9:50	Case Workshop (Socratic Approach, Case Method), Mock Case	Communication and Presentation Skills Workshop	Short Video Mini Cooper Factory	Short Video Business Plans	Business Plan Preparation and Business Plan Competition
9:50-10:10	Break	Break	Break	Break	
10:10-12:00	Case Food Company Preparation	Case Financing a Startup Company	Case Landscaping Business	Case Yoga Equipment	
12:00-1:00	Lunch	Lunch	Lunch	Lunch	
1:00-2:00	Case Food Company Discussion	Case Small Farming Business	Career Planning and Employment Workshop	Business Plan Workshop	
2:50-3:10	Break	Break	Break	Break	
3:10-5:00	Business Plan Workshop	Study Groups	Study Groups	Study Groups	

**Fig. 3** Introduction to business course pod—one week

In a UM Western, business-studies context, a pod is one week (five to six consecutive days) of instruction with six to eight hours of teaching every day (see Fig. 3). The class pods help facilitate greater student connections through interactive exercises, experiential assignments, and other activities. Pods were introduced because of all the limitations that are encountered in big classes. Big classes were broken into smaller sections that were, then, called pods. In this case, the following question arises: how can a classroom experience be reimaged for one week? Important to note is, that, within the week, a sense of belonging among the students has to be created, and they have to be given the tools they need to enable compressed learning.

In this respect, research by Clark and Clark (2000) and Grant (2001) investigated week-long modes with five or six consecutive days from 8.30 am to 4.30 pm. The students communicated that they were quite satisfied with the intensive mode which resulted into a better learning experience. According to surveys conducted by Allen et al. (1982), faculty teaching week-long, intensive courses were less prone to lecture, use a standard text, assign a written term paper, and cover as much material as in traditional classes. Lombardi et al. (1992) illustrated that learners in two- and three-week programs made greater gains than those in five and 15-week programs; and students indicated that they learned as much or more as in regular-length courses. Petrowsky (1996) compared experiences, satisfaction, and academic outcomes in three macroeconomics courses offered in a two-week summer session versus 15-week sessions. Summer students performed better than traditional-format students on class exams involving basic recall of material.

The previous two examples of concentrated scheduling in the Business and Technology area at UM Western show that the opportunities to apply the intensive mode in higher education in the future seem to be limitless. This model caters to the growing demand for a more flexible delivery of learning and more operational efficiency of academic programs and courses.

## CONCLUSIONS

In summary, one of the key takeaways from this chapter is that the intensive mode of course delivery seems to be as efficient, or more efficient, as traditional formats of scheduling, which is suggested in the previous discussion and the following research:

- Student and faculty workload outcomes show that intensive courses are as rigorous as traditional semester-long courses (Anastasi, 2007; Lutes & Davies, 2018).
- Learning outcomes are equivalent or a little bit better for intensive, time-shortened courses than for traditional semester-long courses (Anastasi, 2007; Daniel, 2000; Davies, 2006; Scott & Conrad, 1992; Tatum, 2010; Walsh et al., 2019; Wlodkowski, 2003).
- Assessment results for intensive courses do not (noticeably) vary across 50 disciplines (Geltner & Logan, 2001).

Naturally, when exploring the intensive course design for higher education and reading this chapter, one might wonder what the purpose of this schedule structure is and how this design can be used. Given the many positives of the intensive scheduling format, the subsequent question arises: How should an institution implement intensive scheduling? Reflecting on this question, the following points should be considered when adopting intensive learning (Male et al., 2016):

- Provide a learner-centered environment for longer class periods.
- Require students to learn and apply the material on the same day.
- Offer experiential/real-life applications of the course content.
- Vary the presentation of the class content through different teaching approaches.
- Practice creativity, collaboration, critical thinking, and communication with students.
- Allow for just-in-time meetings between students and instructors.
- Offer immediate and constructive feedback to the students.
- Allow students to connect with other students through interactive exercises.

Source: This list was adopted from Male et al. (2016). *Intensive Mode Teaching Guide*. Office for Learning and Teaching. The University of Western Australia. [https://api.research-repository.uwa.edu.au/ws/portalfiles/portal/99745972/Intensive\\_Mode\\_Teaching\\_Guide\\_Dec\\_21\\_2016.pdf](https://api.research-repository.uwa.edu.au/ws/portalfiles/portal/99745972/Intensive_Mode_Teaching_Guide_Dec_21_2016.pdf)

Intensive delivery is not just a practice exercised at a handful of small liberal arts colleges and graduate/professional programs but rather a new and enduring vision for higher education. This chapter shows that with enough commitment and involvement of the different constituents of a

school, innovation and change can become possible in an efficient and lasting manner. It is the hope that the practical applications showcased in this and other chapters improve the higher education system, add value to the learning experience, and serve as incubators for innovation.

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# The Role of Mentoring in Innovative Progressive Institutions

*Laura Wenk*

## INTRODUCTION

Many of the institutions in the Consortium of Innovative Environments in Learning (CIEL) were designed, as was Hampshire College, with the expressed intention of educating individuals to be creative and independent thinkers who find their own purpose (Patterson & Longworth, 1966). Central ideas for these institutions include (a) individualization of a student's educational path; (b) the application of knowledge through projects done under the aegis of a faculty advisor or a committee; and (c) increasing social justice through active engagement. For each of these shared components and many other curricular issues and goals for students that are peculiar to each institution, faculty mentorship plays a major role in student success.

We often say that student work is fostered through close “advising” by faculty, staff, and peers. The conversations we had with students in

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completing this project challenge us to revise our understanding of the faculty role from that of “advisor” to “mentor,” as the advising role at many institutions is transactional. That is, advisors give approval for course registration, study abroad, field study, and so on. A mentor engages with the students’ questions and individual goals, learning about their intellectual life. The conversations can lead not only to discussions of different possible paths through the institution, but also to the ways one can create a life post-college. That is not to say that mentors simply point to courses and other experiences that support students’ thinking—they challenge students’ thinking and ask them to stretch in new directions. Understanding the role of mentor as distinct from advisor can highlight the components of this aspect of our work and lead to the strengthening of mentorship.

I want to be clear that I am not talking about the romanticized view of a single mentor who takes a student under their wing. As you’ll see, our students have rich mentoring networks. Yet, faculty play unique roles that support students in planning their programs of study and making meaning of their experiences in and out of the classroom. Mentorship is an important ingredient in developing integrative thinking.

As with any teaching-focused institution, the models of progressive education featured in this book all require and encourage faculty mentorship of students. But just how mentorship best benefits students and can be developed effectively in an institution requires understanding more about the student experience in that institution. In particular, what kinds of interactions, programmatic features, and institutional practices bring about the best features of faculty mentorship? And how might lessons from a select few CIEL institutions considered here provide deeper understandings of the potential for mentorship in a broader range of institutions?

The main thrust of this chapter is on the student experience of mentoring in the students’ own words, but I start briefly with my own experience as a faculty member mentoring students at Hampshire College. Then, I share the reflections of one Hampshire student as they moved through their four years considering the role one faculty member played in their academic career. Then I highlight other examples of how mentoring at CIEL institutions has provided students with (a) emotional and psychosocial support; (b) direct assistance with career or academic development; and (c) role modeling. Finally, I explore the institutional structures that appear to foster mentoring relationships, and leave you with ideas that, I hope, can enrich faculty mentoring of students at your institution.

## FACULTY EXPERIENCE OF MENTORING

My favorite part of my job is mentoring undergraduates. My early experiences as a teacher and advisor often put me in a position where the expectation was that I would dispense information and advice. Of course, I often do just that. But as I work with students in and out of the classroom, I have learned to listen as much as I speak, to tease out their ideas, to challenge them, and to see where their thinking goes. I love listening as their ideas unfold. And I find it rewarding to guide them as they ask their own questions and devise methods for gaining purchase on them. And I marvel at the portfolios of work they produce and the sophistication they show in understanding their own strengths and challenges. I believe the growth that results from the mentoring relationship is not unidirectional—I learn a great deal from my students. I’ve developed new courses as a result of the questions students have brought to me. Mentoring keeps me learning; it has made me a better teacher and advisor—and likely, a better person.

## STUDENT EXPERIENCE OF MENTORSHIP

More important than the faculty experience of mentorship is the ways it supports student growth. McKinsey (2016) makes the case that mentorship entails helping an individual move from one stage of life to another, work that clearly goes beyond the role of a course instructor or advisor. This idea is derived in part from the developmental literature—from our understanding of what it takes to transition to college, move through it, and then consider the next steps after graduation. She talks about “mentoring in, mentoring through, and mentoring onward.” At each of these phases in a student’s college career, our actions can support them as they undergo enormous psychosocial, intellectual, and identity changes.

By way of demonstrating the ways mentoring relationships might look over time, I share the views of one Hampshire College student that was interviewed at the end of their fourth year. They described some of the important roles their faculty mentor had filled. She was instrumental in mentoring them in, through, and onward (McKinsey, 2016). Their relationship began as their professor, the instructor for their first-year seminar, oriented them to the college, and helped them feel as though they belonged.

In order to make sense of the student’s experience, it is necessary to understand some Hampshire-specific curricular elements. Hampshire

students move through three Divisions in their four years at the College. Division I is the first-year program, and a time of exploration across the disciplines. Division II is the middle two years in which a student works with a committee of two faculty to design and complete an individualized concentration that culminates in a reflective ePortfolio. Division III is the final year in which a student is mentored by a committee of two faculty to complete a robust full-year project demonstrating their ability to answer complex problems and further develop skills in their area of concentration.

The student remarked:

She is just an incredibly caring person, and so she would care for her students as individuals ... and that means a lot to me. [She] cares about her students in a holistic way which is similar to a parental relationship.

Of course, mentorship was not just about a sense of belonging but also of extending students' understanding of their academics. This student came to Hampshire College with an idea that they were interested in media studies, but without much depth of understanding of the field or what types of courses and experiences would support their learning, and certainly without fully understanding how the Hampshire curriculum works:

I came into college thinking I knew what I wanted to study, and she helped me understand what that really was... It made me think about what I was doing here. I think that I thought [media studies] was more like film studies... But what media studies really is is like a study of culture and a study of culture's effect on society—media's effect on society.

Not only did she support their intellectual questions, she shared information and resources available at the college. As this student moved into their second year, in which they organize a committee of two faculty to guide them in the development of their educational plan for their individualized concentration, their mentor got to know them, their interests and goals. She supported them in reaching their academic goals and finding the resources and opportunities that mattered:

I was writing academic papers different than I'd ever written before. I mean, she consistently connected me to library research help and writing help. And

she always lets me know about grants and places that I can submit my work. She has always encouraged me to go to—I don't know if 'mixers' is the right word but—events where people are talking about their Division II's or talking about Division III's, so it's creating like a community of scholars.

Their mentor also brought her own students together to build their intellectual communities:

She's had several—it's kind of like group advising, but it's more like she's had social gathering for all of her advisees. So, we're going to a barbecue at her house with a lot of other students. It let me get to know, first of all, more of the people that she is working with, but also her family. So I got to meet a lot of people.

Throughout their work together, the student still felt seen as an individual:

I think that she's never let me get away with anything...she has made it clear again and again that nobody's going to take my work seriously if I don't, or nobody should, at least. I remember early in my Division III, there was a moment where she was saying how a piece of my work affected her and what it made her think of... which made me think about my work in a different way. And especially as a media studies student, it's like you have to be thinking about how the audience is going to react to the thing that you put forth.

As they completed their studies, their mentor helped mentor them onward: "And then with postgraduate planning, [she] again has been really helpful."

All in all, as the student reflected on the importance of this relationship, they considered the way that the structure of Hampshire's curriculum supported the development of a mentoring relationship:

I mean, I think it's supported by like, allowing me to choose my committee ... even though I ended up being like a media studies student *and* a theater student—I could still have an institutional relationship with this faculty member, even as my work diverged from hers... My Division III is documentary theater and so it involves interviews and a lot of the stuff that I've learned from media studies. It addresses concepts of mass culture and how people decode media but it's not straight media studies, but it is applied. The classes I took with her did a good job of teaching me the methodologies I needed.



At Hampshire, it's all about reflection—from how you talk about the assignments that you do, to your evaluations, to your retrospectives, to your portfolio, it's all about—it's not just about moving forward. It's about moving forward while understanding what you did. You can't just move forward blindly.

This student's mentor not only helped them understand the field, she helped them learn an important methodology that was useful in a more interdisciplinary piece of work. And she helped the student make sense of the intersections by supporting their reflection and meaning making. But the relationship did not simply happen by chance. The institution created the structures that ensure mentoring relationships happen for all students.

### WHY FOCUS ON FACULTY MENTORSHIP?

From 2017 to 2019, we spoke with 54 students in their final semester before graduating from one of seven CIEL institutions about their experiences of mentorship. In one set of interviews, we began conversations by asking students to draw a mentoring map. We gave them a paper divided into four quadrants, each one representing a different potential area of need: (1) Understanding/Navigating your educational path, (2) Academic skills and knowledge, (3) Wellness and academic/social balance, and (4) Postgraduate planning. We first asked each student to identify the people who had supported them in each of these areas; then we asked them to examine all four quadrants of their map and to identify their primary mentor.

Two striking results emerged from these conversations. First, students had robust networks of mentors, or what Higgins and Thomas (2001) call “mentoring constellations.” Rarely was there an empty quadrant. Figure 1, for example, shows a typical map. Students could identify so many supports because we have created institutions that are highly relational, rich in both “planned” and “natural” mentoring. McKinsey (2016) makes a distinction between planned mentoring, where mentors are recruited and assigned to students, and natural mentoring, which is more spontaneous and occurs organically.

The networks that these students detailed are exactly what Felten and Lambert (2020) describe as the important sets of connections that drive student success in college, supporting students' academic and personal growth, as well as graduate school and career planning. Some of the

<p><b>Understanding/Navigating your educational path (navigating the institution or curriculum – including adjusting to college)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Professor who was also first year advisor</li> <li>● Academic support staff member</li> <li>● Alum in alumni support network</li> </ul>	<p><b>Academic skills and Knowledge</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Professor/ first year advisor</li> <li>● Writing professor</li> <li>● Writing center staff member</li> <li>● Community engagement staff member</li> <li>● Dance program intern (an alum)</li> <li>● Off-campus mentor (through a program for mentoring BIPOC students)</li> </ul>
<p><b>Wellness and academic/social balance</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Friends/peers</li> <li>● Community engagement staff member</li> <li>● Dance program intern (and alum)</li> <li>● Off-campus mentor (through a program for mentoring BIPOC students)</li> </ul>	<p><b>Post graduate planning (grad school/career)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Academic support staff member</li> <li>● Dance program intern (and alum)</li> <li>● Off-campus mentor (through a program for mentoring BIPOC students)</li> <li>● Friends</li> <li>● Community engagement staff member</li> <li>● Career Office staff</li> </ul>

**Fig. 1** Example of a mentoring map from a student at Hampshire College. It has been re-created with the titles and names of relationships rather than the individuals' names

connections were ongoing, while others were more fleeting, but occurred at important moments, such as academic decision points, moments of needs in a project, or times of personal strife. Some were with peers or near peers, and others with staff or faculty. Their effects are likely long-lived and some of these relationships will surely endure post-graduation.

The second interesting point that came out of the mapping exercise is that although students identified a number of individuals as their mentors in each quadrant, when asked to identify their primary mentor, nearly all identified an important faculty member rather than their peers or staff.

In a 2014 analysis of the Gallup-Purdue study, Ray and Marken report that far more important than any other aspect of an institution, connection with faculty mattered. Those individuals who had a professor who got them excited about learning, cared about them as a person, and encouraged them to pursue their goals and dreams were more than twice as likely to be thriving in their careers and in all aspects of their lives as those who

did not have such faculty support. Working on a sustained project and having an internship were also highly impactful experiences. But few students across the country had the combination of all these components.

What many of our progressive institutions do is to ensure highly relational faculty mentorship coupled with projects designed to address students' own questions or individualized educational planning to support their growth on their own goals—what Ray and Marken (2014) call a winning combination. What we can surmise is that what students do and how they do it is critically important. It is incumbent, then, on those of us in higher education to consider how we can foster these high-quality experiences in our institutions, and to do so in an equitable way. These experiences should be built into the institution for all students to experience, not just the honors students who more regularly have access to research experiences with faculty (Mintz, 2021).

If mentors are not provided, we are depending on students' abilities to find a mentor. Considering the research by Lareau on unequal childhoods, we might imagine that students who are more likely to develop meaningful relationships with faculty are middle-class students with college-educated parents. These are students who have experienced the kind of concerted parenting that taught them that they are entitled to ask for what they need and that gave them the skills to do just that. The Strada-Gallup data support this supposition. Seventy-two percent of white students cited a professor as a mentor in college, compared with only 47% of students from traditionally underrepresented racial groups. And, first-generation students were also less likely than students with a college-educated parent to have had a professor as a mentor. Some research also points to gender differences in student reports of having a relationship with a mentor, with female students less likely to report being mentored than male students (Johnson, 2007). Without an institution-wide program that ensures mentorship for all students, we are likely widening the inequities that plague our society.

Many colleges have developed, or are in the process of developing, peer mentorship programs. These are important in adding to a student's mentorship network or constellation. But they do not replace a faculty mentor. In the 2018 Strada-Gallup Alumni Survey, 64% of respondents say their mentor is a faculty member. But only about a third of students agreed that they had a mentor who encouraged them to pursue their own goals. Despite years of understanding the importance of faculty mentorship, institutions struggle with the costs and pressures that make robust faculty

mentorship a relative rarity. How do we build such relationships in a sustainable way? It will take some work at most institutions to consider just how to build faculty mentoring into the institutional structure. The faculty-to-student ratio can mitigate against mentoring (Johnson, 2007).

### WHAT OTHER CIEL STUDENTS HAD TO SAY ABOUT THEIR FACULTY MENTORS

Faculty mentoring matters across all institution types. What can we learn by listening to student voices at progressive institutions? First, we can see examples of the ways students discussed the supports they received. Our students discussed supports along three categories of mentor functions that Jacobi (1991) identified: (1) emotional and psychosocial support, (2) direct assistance with career or academic development, and (3) role modeling. Second, by looking at the contexts in which students received these supports, we can understand the institutional structures and practices that led to the development of these mentoring relationships. Our institutions are deliberate in how we structure our curriculums to necessitate faculty mentorship of students and create relational cultures.

#### *Emotional and Psychosocial Support*

Years of research on belonging at college makes clear that a sense of belonging is crucial to students' adjustment to college, retention, and academic success (Strayhorn, 2012; Felten & Lambert, 2020; Bowen, 2021). As we have seen, no one person is responsible for a student's sense of belonging; it is improved by having broad networks of connection (Felten & Lambert, 2020; Packard, Walsh & Seidenberg, 2004). Yet there is at least indirect evidence that college faculty have a profound effect on a student's psychosocial well-being through a mentoring relationship (Jacobi, 1991; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1977).

When first arriving at college, students need a sense of acceptance or welcoming that encourages their participation. McKinsey (2016) characterizes this phase of a mentoring relationship as "mentoring in." It is a component of orientation to a college or to a discipline or activity. Our students note aspects of their relationships with faculty that led them to feel accepted, encouraged, and supported. One student said:

[I]t's a lot harder for a young person who's trying to figure out why they're even doing this or what's driving them to do this, and it's scary and there's

all this self-doubt and just trying to figure it out...There are thousands or millions of other college students who are just alone in that process and I've had all this help and all this encouragement from [my mentor]. I have grown probably so much more than I would have anywhere else.

Not only did students' mentors become a part of a student's network of support, they also often took on almost a surrogate parenthood as students forged new and important relationships in their first years at college. For example, this student said:

My first year, he was my adviser... As freshman, so you're coming, you're nervous, but you feel like, I got this or maybe I don't. And taking his class and having him as my mentor was—I feel like set me on—put me on the right path because I could easily [have] messed up my first year, because I had so much respect for him and he believes so much in me and what I was doing and ... he would always encourage me. It was like there was this watching eye for me and no matter what, they got me. I got that feeling from my first year. So, I felt like he was a parent in college. I didn't want to disappoint him, so I would stay on track.

CIEL students often noted that their faculty mentors were not only people with whom to discuss academic interests but that they also discussed their emotional life—perhaps not in great detail about the content, but certainly about how they were doing in general and how their emotions affected their work. In that way, faculty were invited in to be part of the support system that allowed students to practice the skills associated with resilience. Such a sense of care gave students the safety to take risks, and develop strategies for decision-making and personal growth, including new ways to manage their emotions. One student said:

I just feel like every time I have a meaningful relationship or a meaningful connection with [my mentor] I feel like incredibly rewarded and it makes me look at everything more optimistically and even more practically and makes—makes me slowly, but surely, make wiser decisions about what I'm doing and what I want to do and who I want to surround myself with.

Another student related:

I think just like having someone that I feel so supported by in the decisions that I'm making for myself at college. I feel like [having] someone in the

back pocket cheering me on has just really allowed me to take more risks with what I do and feel more confident about what I'm doing and being able to do lots of things.

And a third student recounted:

He's also encouraged me to be a little less critical of myself, kind of get out of my own way so that I can be doing my best work without overwhelming myself, which I think is also really important. I tend to be a perfectionist student, and so I need that voice sometimes to be like, "It's okay. You're doing it. Don't get too worked up over it."

These three students give us a glimpse into how mentoring relationships led to important exploration and growth—epitomizing what Bowen (2021) describes as the connection between relationship and resilience. After all, resilience not only requires one to sit through the discomfort of failure, it requires supportive feedback. Faculty can let students know that we often learn more through our mistakes than by getting things right the first time. And we can offer the support and gentle correction that increase resilience.

Our students credited their mentors with taking them seriously and treating them as the adults they are:

[My tendency to take a leadership role] grew and thrives here and that's probably because here people take me seriously—like there are adults who take me seriously and I don't feel like I'm treated like an undergrad college student. I feel like I'm treated like someone who wants to be engaged and around.

Another said:

I didn't know that I will have people who will have my back, not just when I'm in front of them but they talk about how to evolve me with each other. So that really meant a lot because I didn't know what to expect at all. It made me feel like I'm important, my work is important. Because I feel insecure about my writing, about speaking out loud because of accent. And he's like, "What? You shouldn't be because—" And not just saying it but meaning it—"you are smart. You are important. You are here. If you were supposed to know everything, you wouldn't have been here. You're here for

a reason and to learn. That you must do. You must not stop yourself because you feel like you don't know something."

And another student's response not only highlights the importance of the emotional support they received, but it also exemplifies the concomitant growth in metacognitive skills that they developed. This student learned a critical thinking process from their mentor that they were able to apply elsewhere:

I think just like I have learned a lot more about trusting my own gut and things, like I said, a lot of what [my mentor] has done for me is lots of listening and me working it out and then validating how I feel. And so, I feel like I've come to trust my own initial judgments more. I don't feel like I need to go to her as often and say, "I have no idea what to do about this" and have me talk it out. I've learned to be like: 'I've worked out in situations like this before. I've thought about things critically in this way and kind of trusting myself."

I have heard faculty say that they are not equipped to support students emotionally, that they are not therapists. We can see here that one need not be a "therapist" to show caring, to listen, to reassure, and to point out the strengths we see in our students. As faculty mentors, then, we can't shy away from this important role. It makes an enormous difference in students' personal and academic growth.

### *Direct Assistance with Career or Academic Development*

Perhaps this is the role we most identify with a mentor and certainly our students had much to say about the importance of faculty in guiding their learning, their academic path and their skill development, connecting them to internships and campus resources, helping them reflect and make meaning of their work, and affecting their ideas about possible futures.

Effects on learning:

Students spoke of the importance of specific feedback on their work and the way this drove them forward. Here is one example that is typical of faculty mentors' effects on learning:

I think I'm a lot more confident in my work because I have somebody with their full attention on it telling me that it's good. Or that it's not good or this or that. Or telling me what I can improve on. Whereas, if I were in a

bigger university, I'd have feedback but it wouldn't be as detailed or as well-informed.

And another student said:

I'm a completely different person, that's for sure. I've grown into someone totally different. My professors have been really responsible for that, my friends, not so much. My friends were just kind of my comfort, but my professors were the ones who were there to teach the classes, were there to help me understand the classes.

Academic paths:

Faculty often queried students about their interests and reminded them of things they had said or done in the past. They acted as sounding boards and offered their perspectives on student work:

She just has really challenged me to think about my academics in a really interdisciplinary way which I did not really do when I came to Hampshire. And having someone consistently be so connected to my academics and career, she's been helping me with internships and summer things and things like that. So, someone closely connected to that for many years in a row has been so helpful... [She'll say]: 'Well, you did this second year,' or 'You were thinking about this this semester,' or 'Bring in this thing from your internship,' and just having someone that knows my academics so well and knows the path, especially I feel like my time at Hampshire, my academics have really gone on a very deliberate path thing from this to this to this to this.

Yeah. Absolutely. I think that it's helped me to grow as a person, and I've done things—I wouldn't have come into New College thinking I would start a farm. I wasn't going to do any of that. But talking to people about sustainability, for example. That's helped me. I mean, I was kind of interested. I dabbled in it before, I had the Green Club in high school, but wasn't going to do farming, wasn't interested in food or whatever beyond that. And so, all these conversations and just talking about that has given me a different direction that's been relatively influential, at least in the past year or so.

In helping set academic paths, faculty helped shape students' ideas about what was possible for them. Their feedback and encouragement led



students to consider possible coursework and career paths they had not considered before.

Possible futures:

I'm a first-generation student, and so getting a bachelor's is a huge thing. I didn't really have anyone pointing me and being like, 'Oh, you should continue on to a master's program' until I was here and I was working with faculty who had gone through it and who assured me like, 'You can do this. We believe in you.' And just having that type of support here where I couldn't get it at home is amazing, and it's changed so much for me.

He told me like, "I see that you like teaching and someday I feel like you're going to be a good teacher." And I've heard that before but affirming that from a professor who teaches, I was sort of like 'I don't believe it.' But later in my college career, I started taking interest in teaching, [they were] seeing something that I didn't see before.

Academic and professional mentoring was not only accomplished through helping students consider possible future selves and encouraging them to keep going with their studies, faculty also introduced students to scholarly journals, associations, and authentic life experiences related to their academics.

He's had me join the American Chemical Society ... I'm going to go do a presentation at their conference in a couple of weeks but it also has career resources and whatnot. I worked with—or at least under his guidance ... He's had me instruct others on methodologies that I've developed for the project under the guidance.

But [my mentor] has been wonderful to work with. He's really eager to share any and all knowledge he has in both the course setting but also continued in the personal struggles of being an artist or publishing tips or just other things that kind of come with the trade so that when I'm back out in the real world without the academic setting, I have a really good basis on what I'm doing with my chosen field of study.

Internships, resources, and other opportunities:

[T]here's been a lot of pieces that are working with the community and working with youth outside of Hampshire and especially in summers. She has helped me connect with [community engagement staff] to put some of

those internships together and was the first person to tell me about the different types of funding that I could get for my summer projects which allowed me to do the things that I've done. The last two summers, I've gotten grants to cover my summer work with youth. So having someone to be able to connect me with those types of resources.

[W]ell I think I was lucky to have a plethora of mentors in so many different ways and even when I was studying abroad, I met, I had so many professors in that experience who were from the place I was studying and weren't Hampshire related that were extremely impactful. So, I think, and I was encouraged by Hampshire professors to take that experience and to kind of take that risk and so I think that having been pushed to do that and then having met those people, I kind of attribute that to my Hampshire professors in a lot of ways.

I'm currently doing Word Fest, and he told me to apply to that... It's a play writing workshop for playwright scholars, students from the five colleges, and they each submit 10 minutes of their play. When they get accepted, they present, they get to present the play.

Reflection and meaning making:

It's kind of helped me make sense of how things fit when I don't see them fit, even like during my pass meeting, I was like: 'Well, I kind of went from this to this and like this. So, none of it connects.' She has kind of been someone that has challenged me to think about, well, all of it connects in this way. It's helped me think about my academics as a whole and how I can bring everything that I've learned into one thing.

### *Faculty as Role Models*

At times, we as faculty might not realize the impact that we have on students by sharing the stories of our own paths and by openly demonstrating our love of learning, our passions for our chosen fields, or sharing our own scholarship. Listening to student voices about the importance of working in the company of devoted faculty highlights our function as role models. Here is what three students had to say:

I feel nervous about the plan to take time off [before grad school] and a little bit unsure of what I'm doing but I also think that that's really normal. I feel really excited for graduate school, I feel like I don't wanna rush it ...

but with getting my MFA which is what I want to do, um, it feels like something I really don't want to rush. My committee were really supportive of this. They both told me about what they did before graduate school. It was really—really reassuring that they did a few things before grad school. I didn't realize.

I would say that they have been nothing but helpful. I mean like truly ... they have done nothing but—how do I put it—like encouraged my commitment to the concept of education. And I mean, not just through the coursework they asked us to do, but also through them as role models, as like elementary as that might sound.

Yeah. He does inspire me to do my best work. [It's] his free spirit. I don't know. It's really weird. Since the first day, I was just—he's very passionate about what he does, about his work. I've seen his performance. I've seen him teach and how he responds to students.

Students might be inspired and impressed by faculty and their accomplishments, but that is not all there is to being a role model. There is a component of illuminating the path and making it clear that this is a path that is open to them as well. It is not an exclusive club, but a viable option. Students were heartened by the welcoming nature of their role models:

It's had a tremendous impact on my life and being guided in a way I should get to where I'm trying to go ... And I see that, and I have a chance to be mentored by this person who actually wants to invest time in me and not just saying 'go research it on your own' but telling me how you got there. And my path may not be the same as yours, but you're still giving me resources and tools to say 'this is how I got here, this is what I suggest.' It's been good.

I think absolutely it inspires me to do my best work just because as you walk up and down the halls of New College you have published works by the faculty in frames down the hallway but then their doors are also open and they are warm, friendly, and helpful. It's an interesting dynamic of being around impressive people and then very inspiring faculty but also people who bring you in and want you to be successful as well.

It is helpful in trying to improve one's own mentoring capacity to better understand these functions of mentors. We can recognize our own relationships with students and practice the attributes of those who

support students across their academic and career paths and their social/emotional lives, seeing ourselves as role models who can help students along paths that we see clearly, but might be invisible to a novice. If we want such experiences for all students, we must think institutionally and not solely about our own practices.

### INSTITUTIONAL STRUCTURES THAT SUPPORTED MENTORING

Students do not necessarily come to college knowing that a mentor is important or knowing how to find one (Lambert, 2018). That is one of many learned behaviors that lead to success at college. If our institutional structures do not support the development of mentoring relationships for all students, we are creating a hit-or-miss situation where one's prior experiences and current luck affect future resources and outcomes.

From our discussions with students, it became clear that the nature of mentoring was connected to program and institution structure as well as requirements and opportunities. There are differences in how mentorships are set up on our campuses with different opportunities for contact and for different degrees of both informal and formal mentoring. Just what are the institutional structures that support mentoring? From our vantage points at CIEL institutions, these can be: (a) curricular structures and the practices that grow up around them, (b) physical structures, and (c) the structure of the faculty.

#### *Curricular Structure*

The type of work that faculty do with students varies by institution. In describing mentorship, students often noted how their work with faculty affected them as they developed their self-designed concentrations, ePortfolios, and capstone projects. These were inflection points in the curriculum that seem to support goal-setting, reflection, and the development of inquiry skills that required mentorship. Here is what students had to say about their experiences:

Self-designed programs of study:

“I think one thing that definitely helps is just the structure of having committees of choosing who you want to work with and again getting all of these combinations of people together...So having the ability to really sit down and think about who you want to work with and who would be

beneficial to your project and who you think can offer you the best advice is certainly helpful.”

“...you get paired up with an adviser—who really becomes your point of contact for your educational journey...Fairhaven has created that culture by having an adviser who is your single point of contact who really coaches you and mentors you through your educational journey.”

### *ePortfolios*

“Until I started to build my ePortfolio, I had no idea that there were themes that kept—that kind of drove my work and made it hang together in such a meaningful way. Building my ePortfolio has helped me understand what I am trying to do...I can explain my work better. It is different than saying what I’m majoring in. It is about explaining what drives me—what my work is.”

### *Capstone Projects*

A few CIEL institutions have robust universal capstone projects overseen by one or more faculty. The interaction around the project is substantial with a real focus on integrating the project with the students’ concentration, supporting the students’ individualized goals, and often pushing the boundaries of their understanding by focusing on interdisciplinarity and/or a community engaged component. The capstone affords a substantial mentoring opportunity.

“Well... I think the fact that the thesis here at Hampshire is so independent and that you work closely with usually two people like that in itself has fostered our relationship and the structure of Division III fostered our relationship really well. We meet every week. Um, but it also really depends on the person ‘cause I, I got lucky enough to find two professors who were willing to be hands on and really close with me and I know that I as a student am someone who’s gonna seek that out from professors. So, I think in both ways, it was a lot of luck and a lot of having friends ... who could kind of guide me towards people.”

And

“Div III was where I really saw my writing and my ability to really analyze grow. In all my course writing—and there was a lot of it—I felt like I was just writing for the professor, you know? And it was really rushed. Sometimes I

didn't really have time to revise it at all. Now I think I really know what writing is about. I have learned so much that you can't even see, 'cause I might cut it out entirely. Even though I liked learning the stuff, it doesn't fit. And my committee is really—I really credit them with giving me the kind of feedback that is helping me. They ask questions and I have to be able to explain why this is 'in' and that is 'out.' And they are always giving me interesting things to read or telling me to meet with a research librarian or some such."

The close relationship that forms through mentorship in an individualized project is a rare thing. In many elite colleges, a capstone project or senior thesis might be available to a small fraction of the student body through an honors program. An institution with a selective senior capstone ought to consider the gateways and barriers to inclusion in such a program. And, regardless of the specific curricular structure, there are other routes to connection between faculty and students. One such route is through informal work spaces, such as lounges, labs, shared dining spaces, et cetera.

### *Spaces*

In some of our institutions, the spaces afforded greater contact among students and faculty—there were glaring differences between large institutions and smaller (even schools within a large school). In smaller institutions, there were more spaces, such as lounges or labs, that supported students' congregating and working with or near faculty. Sometimes the classroom acted as that space when classes were constructed for greater collaboration. Informal contact is built into those schools' structures and spaces and culture. Students often remarked on the value of the informal conversations afforded by collaborative work spaces—or even by the geography of campus.

"I see him in class but more so I'll usually do a lot of work... I kind of work upstairs outside of his office. There's a little table there so I interact with him there a bunch."

Or:

"I work a lot in the Collaborative Modeling Center. It is a great space—really comfortable. And all the software—the programs I need are on those

computers. I could be working there on my project and the person next to me is doing something totally different. When one of the faculty who also work there—like the faculty who kind of oversee the space—come in we all get to talking. I love seeing the connections in what we do. Sometimes we end up just chatting—not really just about our work. It’s kinda homey and just nice.”

We can probably all consider ways to build collaborative spaces—in lobbies, alcoves, outside of offices—and make them available to students. Having them work near us is not only a gift to them, it makes for pleasant connections for faculty too. Connection is reciprocal and we should remember the joy and motivation for our work that we get as a result of our interactions with our students.

### *Faculty Characteristics*

The student descriptions of their mentoring relationships show faculty who were caring, warm, compassionate, had an orientation toward helping, and were generous with feedback. Even at our smaller institutions that are built on relational teaching, advising, and mentorship, there is variation in the quality of mentoring. And of course, there are differences in students’ receptivity to advice or in whether they “show up” for mentoring. What works for one student might not work for another. It is worth noting that becoming a strong mentor can, like anything else learned, take time and attention regardless of institutional structure, but it is not out of reach for anyone.

At most institutions, faculty do have some advising responsibilities. Although I have made distinctions between mentorship and advising, advising is one route into a mentoring relationship and there is evidence that careful advising in the first year can lead to a mentoring relationship later (Johnson, 2007). What is more, advising is a space in which the importance of mentoring can be openly discussed. In *Making the Most of College* (2001), Richard Light discusses his recommendations to his first-year students. After hearing about their personal goals, he suggests that one additional goal in their first year, and in each subsequent year, ought to be to get to know at least one faculty member well and to allow that faculty member to get to know them. In interviews upon graduation, his students report that this was the single most important piece of advice they received. Despite the fact that advising structures vary across

institutions, professional development with regards to advising could support faculty in developing a relational approach themselves in addition to urging students to step up in developing mentoring relationships.

One of our students had a suggestion about faculty hires and professional development with regards to advising. They said:

“I think when people are hired here or if this doesn’t happen, I assume this happens, but if it doesn’t happen, it probably should, that when people are hired here, when they’re applying to work here, that they expect to have relationships with students. It’s small and we’re all working on our own things. So, you don’t always have a support network of like, okay, here are the English majors, here at the science majors. While there will be some, a lot of times, your friends are not in your field—it really is your [faculty]” committee that becomes an important constant.”

We certainly see the results of faculty mentorship that goes beyond their advisees of record:

“...for professors that weren’t on my committee, I probably got a little less time with them because they had their own advisees, but I’ve never had a professor say, ‘No, don’t come to my office hours.’ You know, [this professor] was never on my committee, but she went above and beyond to help me out with the end of my Division III project and just knowing what was—what I wanted out of a project versus what was expected of me.”

And another:

“I think that Hampshire definitely makes it a lot easier than other types of schools... Hampshire—its kind of this smaller space that really encourages the student/faculty relationships that I was able to make those connections. And especially with faculty here being so open and willing to meet with students and having office hours all the time, and I think it’s been really beneficial in forming those types of relationships.”

A diverse faculty has a critical impact on the mentorship that BIPOC students receive. Greater faculty diversity most surely increases the likelihood of all students finding faculty who see them and who support their work. And for white faculty who are mentoring students who do not share their racial, ethnic, or economic class background, it is crucial that we consider the ways we do or do not expect our students to be “like us.”



In these interview excerpts, I shared a number of student quotes in which students were inspired by their faculty mentors and wanted to be like them. But what happens if students do not see their future selves when they look at the faculty? Felicia Rose Chavez (2021) reminds us that we can easily create academic cultures that marginalize students from traditionally under-resourced communities. We have to let our students' voices be heard and support their growth—even if it means letting go of some of the ways of thinking, writing, and being that we have valued. I hope that sharing students' quotes in this chapter has shown the importance of elevating student voices. It is my strongest recommendation that as we work to increase mentorship on our campuses, we do it in concert with discussions about diversity, equity, and inclusion.

### CAUTIONS

In addition to the caution that mentoring does not simply perpetuate the culture of academia or of our disciplines if they are inequitable, there are a couple of other cautionary tales. There were big differences in what good mentorship meant to students and how they describe it. There is a difference in students' level of expectation of contact. A mismatch can affect satisfaction. The best experience at one school might feel inadequate at others, which leads to dissatisfaction. Some colleges advertise a program with close advising and mentoring relationships. Students at these institutions have high expectations, and an advisor who is not so available or approachable as expected becomes a disappointment. At other programs, the very same advisor might prove to be more than a student expected. Whatever mentoring structure your institution creates, the appropriate expectations need to be set through your claims to prospective students.

### LESSONS

Thinking across the ways that mentors impact students, what stands out is the continuity that mentorship brings to the student experience. By working with a mentor over time, sharing their in- and out-of-classroom learning, students more thoroughly develop integrative thinking.

Even in this small group of progressive institutions, there is a good deal of variation along a number of dimensions that affect student need and opportunity for mentorship. For the most part, all participants we talked to had mostly positive experiences. The findings paint a compelling and

positive picture of what strong mentorship can do for intellectual and personal growth and the development of ideas of a future self. The differences in how mentorships are set up on our campuses offer a glimpse into the diverse opportunities for contact among faculty and students in both planned and natural mentoring.

For any institution, it is possible to increase mentorship by keeping in mind the idea of a mentoring network. Some of the ideas that emerged through our conversations with students are that we would do well to:

- Create spaces for informal contact.
- Consider the inflection points in our curriculums where more student-directed work can be added under the guidance of faculty.
- Have explicit conversations with faculty about what it means to mentor students.

It's important for individual faculty to maintain an open stance during meetings with students, listening carefully for students' interests, passions, and questions. These are well worth encouraging. As we learn more about our students' interests, sharing information about resources and opportunities on and off campus can create pivotal experiences for students. And faculty can look for opportunities for conversation outside of class—perhaps lingering after class for conversations, encouraging students to come to office hours, or creating collaborative work spaces near their offices. And, though we are not trained therapists, there is a role for faculty in giving psychosocial support to students. Hearing the voices of students in our progressive institutions can give us all a better sense of the importance of, and methods for, building stronger faculty mentorship on our campuses.

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# When Innovative Institutions Fail: Quest University, Partnerships, Financial Sustainability

*Jeff R. Warren*

## INTRODUCTION

The idealism that drives curricular and pedagogical innovation may create inspiring post-secondary institutions; however, institutional sustainability requires commensurate attention and care to the practical realities of their business models. This chapter examines the case study of the financial challenges of Quest University Canada (QUC), located in Squamish, British Columbia. Founded with a vision to reshape higher education, the university welcomed its first class in 2007. Enrolment grew over the following years, but not enough to avoid annual operating deficits. In 2020, QUC filed for insolvency protection and restructured through a partnership that extended the life of the institution before forcing it into suspending academic programming in 2023.

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Like Tolstoy's unhappy families, every struggling university struggles in its own way. Yet struggles still fall into categories, and the story of Quest University fits into a wider pattern of institutional closures and mergers. If the early part of the twentieth century witnessed a substantial growth in post-secondary institutions, the early twenty-first century is witnessing an increase in mergers and closures. In the United States, nearly 15% of all degree granting institutions have closed in the last 10 years, and over "half of the nearly 1,300 institutional closures of the past 50 years have occurred in the past decade" (Azziz, December 2022b). While perhaps more prevalent in the United States, mergers and closures appear to be a global trend (Azziz, November 2022a). Especially susceptible are the small, private institutions with limited resources described as "invisible colleges" (Tarranta et al., 2018). QUC fits the profile of several institutions that face struggles: tuition dependent for revenue, no endowment, and a residential campus. These factors leave little ability to adjust to declines in enrolment, leaving the institution susceptible. When QUC reached the crisis point, it pursued partnerships from a place of weakness resulting in a compromised agreement with a for-profit company. In short, institutions like QUC need to consider dynamic partnerships and other forms of innovation before a crisis point is reached to support them becoming resilient and sustainable.

My first visit to Quest University was in 2012. I was consulting for another institution on a curricular design project, and we visited QUC to learn about their model. During my visit, I was captivated by how engaged and interactive the students were in their seminar style classes. Inspired by the block model of Colorado College (Ashley, 2021), QUC's classes are capped at 20 students and run for 18 instructional days over three and a half weeks. Students meet in class three hours a day, and typically work outside of class 3–6 hours per day. In my visit, I learned how pedagogy adjusts to the block, trading lectures for discussions and emphasizing problem and project-based learning. I watched second year students who, after two years of taking courses across the arts and sciences, presented to their peers about their self-designed concentration programme to guide their final two years, structured around a "question" that motivates their course choices (Wonham & Derby-Talbot, 2022). The curricular content in part drew upon the experiences of the founding faculty that designed it: the "foundation" courses of the first two years drew upon core curriculum structures from Columbia University and St. John's College, and the "question" process was inspired by "the plan" from Bennington College.

I was drawn to the curriculum and the highly engaged students, and I found myself fortunate enough to receive an offer to join the faculty a year later. In 2020, when QUC entered insolvency protection, I was on sabbatical. A month later I entered the role of interim Chief Academic Officer, was a member of the Board of Governor's Restructuring Committee, later became Vice President Academic, and continued to play a frontline leadership role throughout the remainder of the events described below. While I was closely involved in some of the events described below and had access to additional information, here I aim to present information that is widely available.

Through tracing Quest University's restructuring path, I interact with recent trends in post-secondary mergers, acquisitions, and partnerships, with an emphasis on the opportunities for innovative institutions. Quest University's restructuring story is of interest in itself, culminating in a contested court case decided by a precedent-setting decision, but the aim of this chapter is to provide institutional leaders with ways to imagine sustainable futures for their institutions. The chapter begins with a brief history of QUC, identifying partnerships that both enabled the creation of the institution and limited its chances of sustainability. The restructuring process in 2020 and resulting partnership are examined in further detail, leading to an analysis of the growth of service provider partnerships within the post-secondary sector. This chapter aims to use the case study of QUC to encourage institutional leaders to critically consider whether their institutions are financially sustainable, and to take early steps to make the necessary changes to continue to fulfil their educational missions. In other words, it is not enough for innovative and progressive institutions to hold to their educational mission to provide radically student-centred learning: they need to do so in a way that is financially viable.

## QUEST UNIVERSITY CANADA: A BRIEF HISTORY

In 2007, Quest University Canada welcomed its first class of students. In January 2020, the university filed for insolvency protection to avoid being brought into bankruptcy by a charitable foundation controlled by one of the founders of the university. Almost a year later, QUC successfully restructured through a partnership agreement. In May 2023, the terms of that partnership forced QUC to suspend academic operations. In this chapter I focus on QUC's restructuring and the resulting partnership agreements. The history of QUC before restructuring is worthy of its own

sustained analysis; however, to create context to further discuss the latter periods of the institution, below is a periodization of the history of the university, followed by brief descriptions of each historical stage with a focus on how the decisions made in those time periods laid the ground-work for QUC's insolvency and eventual suspension of operations.

1998–2002: Initial idea and planning, including establishing charitable foundations to support the project. This was led by David Strangway after retirement as the president of the University of British Columbia, former UBC vice president Peter Ufford, and charity lawyer Blake Bromley.

2002–2007: Passing of the Sea to Sky University Act in the British Columbia legislature to form the University (Sea to Sky University Act, 2002). The land development process included purchasing a large parcel of land and selling lands in the outer ring to offset the costs of the central parcel of land for the university. The campus was planned and developed. A significant and complexly structured (Tomlinson, 2018) gift was provided by Stuart Blusson. The founding faculty designed the Quest curriculum. The end of this period saw significant senior leadership turnover and the future and survival of the institution was questionable even before the first student arrived on campus.

2007–2015: In Fall 2007 QUC welcomed the first incoming class of students. The focus of this period was on delivery of the academic programme and growing enrolment, and soon Quest led the country in most categories of the National Survey of Student Engagement. Enrolment peaked at an incoming class of 240 students, and QUC had one EBITA positive year. During this period, Quest reported it was operating with the support of a gift to cover operating deficits in the startup years (Bouw, 2013). This gift was eventually revealed as a loan and was the same loan that brought the university into bankruptcy protection. QUC entered a partnership with long-term contractual implications with a local developer to build dormitories on campus, and this developer joined the Board of Governors.

2015–2017: A new president developed a strategy to move the institution to financial sustainability. However, the strategy was poorly executed, and during this period, there was significant leadership turnover and division within the faculty. Recruiting numbers dropped by half. The employment of the president was terminated, followed by legal claims (Chua, 2017).

2017–2020: The institution stabilized under a new president, but enrolment continued to decline. Operating losses grew, exacerbated by

debt servicing costs. An attempt was made to monetize the campus lands through a development project, but stalled when the university was sued by charities controlled by founder Bromley that acted as trustee to land beneficially owned by major donor Blusson (Chua, 2023).

2020: QUC filed for insolvency protection under Companies' Creditors Arrangement Act (CCAA). The CCAA process was prolonged due to both transactional complexities and the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. After a challenging search and a contested court case, Quest emerged from CCAA through agreements with Primacorp Ventures (PCV).

2021–2023: The PCV partnership fails, leaving Quest with no option but to suspend academic operations.

This chapter focuses on the partnership between Quest University (QUC) and Primacorp Ventures (PCV) that enabled QUC to successfully restructure and exit insolvency protection in 2020. This partnership extended the university's lifeline, enabling the graduation of 30% of the total graduates of the university. The terms of the partnership were restrictive and did not enable QUC to control its own destiny, forcing the university into suspension of academic programming.

As this brief history of Quest University shows, the institution's history is inseparable from the history of the land transactions surrounding the university. The thread of transactions that resulted in the establishment of the university and the newly zoned development lands surrounding the university are significantly complex and deserve a separate study. For the focus of this chapter, however, I want to draw out two points about the partnerships established at the outset of the university, as they were the initial partnership structures that also contributed to the university's demise.

First, the founders of the institution took a "build it and they will come" mentality, building a beautiful campus for a capacity that was never reached by QUC. Several of the facilities—including world class recreation facilities—were built to support double the student capacity. On the other hand, the university curriculum was designed as a residential undergraduate institution, but there were no dormitories included in the initial build, making QUC reliant upon other developers and property owners for the essential service of housing their students. This introduces a theme of this case study: from the outset, QUC entered partnerships to enable its continued existence that also contributed to its eventual downfall.

Even if the initial architecturally stunning hilltop campus build out was fully funded, the decision to develop recreation facilities and other



buildings that would not be used to capacity saddled the university with ongoing and non-scalable facilities maintenance costs. In each year of QUC's operations, facilities costs were an outsized expense that weighed on the bottom line.

Second, from the start of the institution, the interests in the university lands of individual members of the Board of Governors was structurally in conflict with the interests of the university. Organizations controlled by two former Board of Governors members were the most litigious in the financial restructuring and court process of 2020. Even if the initial intentions of these individual Board members were to help the university, the structure of the agreements entered into led to conflicts that resulted in the university and the former Board members being at odds.

There are three main themes that I return to throughout this analysis of the case study of QUC's restructuring and partnership that I believe will be useful for many institutions to consider: (1) institutions should have clear planning on land use and ownership; (2) service provider structures, while growing, should be approached cautiously; and, most importantly, (3) institutions should restructure before they think it is necessary.

## INSOLVENCY AND RESTRUCTURING

In January 2020, the Board of Governors announced that QUC had filed under the Companies' Creditors Arrangement Act (CCAA), which is "a federal law allowing insolvent corporations that owe their creditors in excess of \$5 million to restructure their business and financial affairs." (Government of Canada). While it is exceptionally rare for a university to restructure under CCAA, a few months after QUC exited from CCAA, Laurentian University filed for protection under CCAA, becoming the first public university in Canada to do so.

QUC had accumulated debt from operating losses since inception and reported that the secured debt of \$23.4 million had been demanded (Petition to the Court, 2020, p. 11). This debt was to a charitable foundation named the Vanchorverve Foundation, which reports a mailing address of QUC founder Blake Bromley's company and counts Bromley as a director. This debt was assigned to Vanchorverve by other charities Bromley served as a director for.

The Board of Governors filed under CCAA to provide QUC time and a process to financially restructure. For QUC, successful restructuring required the university to find a proponent able to achieve several items.

First among these was settling with creditors. Second was providing a financial runway for the university to rebuild. Since QUC always had operating losses, removing all debt would not provide the ability fund any further operating losses and QUC needed operating funds to have a chance to build to sustainability. Third, QUC sought a partner that embraced QUC's unique academic programming and values. Fourth, since QUC had previously been unable to reach financial operating sustainability, a partner that had resources and expertise to help QUC become sustainable would be highly desirable. Any arrangement needed to contemplate the structure of QUC as a board governed not-for-profit operating under its own legislative act.

With these requirements in mind, QUC established three main threads for restructuring. The first was a land transaction. In this scenario, some part of the land would be sold to cover the debts, or all the land would be sold and QUC could enter a lease on the campus. The second was a partnership with a public educational institution, potentially exploring models like the affiliated college model (e.g., pursuing something similar to institutions in the "New College" movement that eventually became a part of a larger public institution). This was a preferred outcome, but also the most complex (and may have introduced a further set of challenges, as highlighted by the New College of Florida situation in 2022–23). The third was a partnership with a private educational group. The challenge of this approach is that many private groups seek an ownership stake in an investment, and QUC's not-for-profit structure does not allow this possibility. One option for private partners is a service provider model wherein the partner builds in control mechanisms without ownership that do not impede upon legislative or regulatory requirements. These partnerships are increasing in frequency and discussed in more detail later in the chapter. QUC entered exclusive relationships with agents for real estate and private educational institution transactions.

These structures and processes were established when I entered leadership. The real estate and private partnership agents had gone to market with the opportunity to purchase real estate or partner with the institution. There was optimism in getting a positive result, especially since QUC's real estate assets were larger than the debt load. However, the operational value of the university was diminished by declaring insolvency, as the very public process of CCAA created a significant headwind to solving the operational deficits created by insufficient recruiting. Put another way, it is difficult to ask students to attend a university that has announced

it is not sustainable. In retrospect, QUC would have been better served by working in the background to establish a partnership to address financial problems before reaching the point where declaring CCAA was necessary. QUC had made one unsuccessful attempt to do so through monetizing land holdings before entering CCAA.

QUC's already weak position was worsened by the shock of the COVID-19 pandemic. The emergence of the pandemic two months after QUC entered CCAA had several negative effects on the restructuring process and revealed weaknesses in the structures QUC used when it entered CCAA. The immediate effect of COVID-19 was a chilling effect on every restructuring strand. As the word "unprecedented" was repeated to describe the global situation and the stock market decline, the appetite for risk to participate in a new venture or to make a major real estate investment was severely diminished. At the time, it was unclear what effects the pandemic might have on real estate prices, the market, and the possible timing of returning to in-person classes on a residential campus. There were some larger questions, including whether the model of residential education might be completely disrupted by the wide participation in online learning. Additionally, at this time, the substantial rise in equities and real estate by the end of 2020 and early 2021 was not considered a likely outcome. Internally, significant effort was directed to responding to the pandemic, including supporting repatriating a travel study course of students who were studying on a ship in the Antarctic Ocean when worldwide lockdowns were starting. In March 2020, students who were already uncertain about the future of their university left their rooms on campus and finished off the academic year learning remotely. Given the uncertainty about the future of the institution, many students worked to graduate that spring and summer, and many others made plans to transfer or take a semester off.

The net result was a prolonged CCAA process that put the university in an even weaker position and lowered the chances of achieving a positive restructuring result. There were three features of this weakened position. First, during this time of uncertainty, we supported students to complete their studies, but as more students graduated and fewer students started their studies, the overall student numbers dropped. Fewer students lowers current and future revenue at a tuition-dependent institution, and increases the turnaround time and cost for potential partners to support bringing the university to sustainability. In September 2020 very few students started at QUC, a university with no students on campus, remote courses,

and without knowing if there would be a future for the institution after the fall semester. Second, the debts increased. The combination of decreased tuition revenue, increased professional fees during CCAA, and compounding debt interest substantially grew QUC's financial burn rate. Third, the value of the land began tracking away from assessed value and closer to the value of the debt. At the start of CCAA, the assessed value of the land was more than double the debt obligations. Between the unknown market conditions, increasing debts, and a prolonged CCAA process, the campus lands became viewed as a distressed asset valued by the debt value rather than assessed value.

The COVID-19-induced resetting of the CCAA process also revealed that in an attempt to clear the entanglements that had brought the university into CCAA, it had entered into other agreements that were limiting. Perhaps in hope that the services might not be required, QUC entered exclusive agency relationships with steep fee structures for certain types of potential proponents that limited the ability to make progress on possible transactions.

Near the end of 2020, QUC was unable to further extend the search for ideal proponents and needed a resolution before the accumulated debts exceeded the distressed property value. A November 2 report by the court monitor states that at the time "there were effectively two viable proposals for Quest to consider, as the other proposals received were not sufficiently advanced or contained conditions that could not be satisfied within a reasonable timeframe" (Monitor's Fourth Report, 2020, p. 9). One of these proposals involved the university closing. QUC had run out of time to generate any more preferable arrangements and brought to the court an agreement with Primacorp Ventures (PCV), owned by Peter Chung.

### QUEST UNIVERSITY ENTERS A PARTNERSHIP

The terms of this Primacorp transaction were brought before the Supreme Court of British Columbia for approval (Supreme Court of British Columbia, 2020). The court case was contested and resolved through a judicial order that was the first order of its kind in the province. The transaction with PCV involved QUC selling the entirety of its real estate holdings to extinguish debt obligations and entering into three agreements with PCV. These agreements were: (1) a long-term lease on the campus lands, (2) a revolving line of credit to fund operations, and (3) an

“Operating Agreement” that entitled PCV to serve as exclusive provider for revenue-generating services to the university, including marketing, recruiting, and fundraising (Monitor’s Report, 2020, pp. 11–12). While each of these agreements imposed significant limitations on QUC, here I delve further into the details of the operating agreement, setting up a discussion of other service agreement partnerships in the post-secondary sector in the next section. In short, the Operating Agreement saw QUC exclusively outsource all revenue generation to PCV, with PCV receiving a hefty percentage of all revenue. The Operating Agreement states that QUC’s educational mission is PCV’s value proposition. However, this level of mission commitment is structurally secondary to the financial controls PCV holds over the institution. While QUC exited insolvency without needing to terminate faculty and retained control of admissions standards, academic programming, and quality, the cumulative effect of all these agreements created significant limitations to QUC’s ability to be in control of its own destiny. We knew that this was not an ideal arrangement, and I clearly identified the risks of partnership to the Board of Governors, but as it was the only opportunity available to create continuance for the educational program, faculty, and students, QUC entered a partnership with PCV.

The QUC Board of Governors hoped that outsourcing marketing and recruiting would result in the reversal of the downward enrolment trends that had contributed to the state of the institution. QUC’s first incoming class in 2007 was 84 students, and incoming classes grew to a peak of 240 in 2013. The price of growth in numbers was deeply discounted tuition payments. QUC’s geographically undifferentiated fees resulted in the highest tuition in the country for Canadian students, but competitive pricing for international students and especially for American students comparing QUC to other innovative liberal arts and sciences institutions. While it changed over time, QUC’s student population mix was roughly 40% Canadian, 40% American, and 20% from 40 other countries. Despite having competitive international student tuition pricing during a decade where almost the entirety of growth in the Canadian higher education sector was driven by a growth in international tuition wherein “all new money in Canadian higher education since 2011 has come from international tuition fees” (Usher, 2022, p. 41), at QUC non-American international students received the highest discounts.

2015 and 2016 saw a levelling out of incoming student numbers and the first step of a positive trend of lower average discount rates. This

positive movement was interrupted by a 30% drop in enrolment during a tumultuous period that involved an abrupt departure of a president. The downward trend continued, and two further years of only reaching half of the enrolment of 2015/16 contributed to the conditions under which QUC entered insolvency protection. Fall 2020 was in the midst of financial restructuring and—like the rest of the sector—QUC was offering courses exclusively online. QUC actively informed potential students that they were welcome to start their studies, but the university did not have funding secured past the fall semester and the future of the university was uncertain. Despite these challenges, over 30 students started their studies in fall 2020.

PCV took over exclusively recruiting for Quest in fall 2020, and over the next 18 months spent significantly more than \$1M in marketing and recruiting expenses, including developing a new brand image. However, the results were abysmal, bringing in 41 students in fall 2021 (against a target of 120), and 24 students in fall 2022 (against a target of 200).

The results are dramatic enough that a common first response is whether the recruiting underperformance was intentional to cause QUC to quickly use up the available line of credit and enter bankruptcy so that PCV could use the land for other plans (as of May 2023, the land is currently listed for sale). Having served in the trenches at the time, my view is that the marketing and recruiting functions were spectacularly mismanaged, and the lack of recruiting performance was detrimental not only to Quest but also to PCV. There are two main reasons for my evaluation: land zoning and financial motivations. I provide some detail about the specifics of the structures surrounding the failure of this partnership, as they reflect substantial themes in the wider discussion of service provider partnerships described in the next section.

Even after the acquisition of the campus lands by PCV, there were financial motivations for QUC to remain on campus. The land is restrictively zoned, allowing for university use with the potential for a university to develop and operate on the land with a flexibility not afforded to another type of owner. Additionally, the Sea to Sky University Act declares that QUC is exempt from property taxes, and taxes will be owed when QUC no longer operates on the campus. In summary, land ownership and use is a key issue within partnerships, and in this case, QUC operating on the lands raises the land value for the owner.

Furthermore, PCV had a financial incentive to generate revenue for QUC in the agreements. The structure of the agreements was

designed—at least in the short to medium term—to provide gains to PCV even while QUC ran an operating deficit. The fee structure of the three agreements meant that in even the best-case scenario, the line of credit offered to QUC by PCV would not be able to be paid back within the 3-year term, and PCV would have options for if and how further credit was provided. With the fee structure in place (including lease, loan interest, and service provider fees), more than half of gross revenue was returned to PCV over the term of the loan. In a nutshell, increased revenue for QUC was aligned with the motivations for PCV, as PCV could still financially benefit even if it funded annual operating losses for QUC. This fee structure is one way that a private company can exert financial control over a self-governed institution and is a feature of other partnership structures.

Additionally, the structure of the line of credit provided PCV with the opportunity to have options once the three-year term was up, including: providing further funding; leveraging further influence over QUC as a condition of further funding; or, not providing further funding. The latter could be considered a structure of using the distressed purchase price of the land plus the line of credit (less fees returning to PCV) as a “stop loss” to ensure that the purchase price remains less than the assessed value.

One of the challenges facing private investment in not-for-profit institutions is how to exert influence over an entity that legally must remain independent and has no ownership share structure. The QUC Board of Governors remains independent, along with the academic governance of the institution. However, the exclusivity of the agreements meant that QUC could be (and was) pressured by continued debts to the same organization that controlled the revenue stream. The net effect of the banker pressuring QUC to increase revenue but QUC unable to raise revenue created a situation where QUC could protect academic integrity but was unable to make any necessary changes to lead towards sustainability. These controls—which are included in service provider agreements discussed in the next section—created an exceptionally challenging environment for QUC leadership. We launched a strategic academic planning process that included more clearly communicating the ways QUC’s existing programming meet the needs of learners, expanded a previously restrictive transfer policy to encourage growth in transfer students, and were in the process of developing additional academic programming. However, since recruiting was exclusively outsourced to PCV, none of these plans were able to succeed due to the poor performance of PCV recruiting.

Two years into the agreements with PCV, QUC's bottom line deficits were in line with the joint projections with PCV. However, since revenue targets were significantly lower than projected due to increasingly small incoming classes, these targets could only be achieved through QUC reducing costs. As the majority of university costs were fees to PCV, it was challenging to identify savings and maintain academic quality. The real problem, however, was the future: small incoming classes have a four-year shadow and have significant impact upon future financial projections. With the underperformance of PCV's recruiting team, PCV did not benefit from the financial incentives of the agreements as planned and made the decision to not extend any further funding to QUC, leaving QUC with no choice but to suspend academic operations after spring 2023.

The QUC service provider partnership with PCV requires that both parties are aligned in terms of actions and outcomes for success. QUC's retained the ability to act independently, but not the ability to act independently and continue to survive. Service provider relationships continue to grow across the sector with varying levels of success. PCV based their agreement with QUC on the Grand Canyon University/Education model, and now I contextualize the QUC partnership experience within a selection of the broader trends in service provider partnerships.

### “SERVICE PROVIDER” PARTNERSHIP AGREEMENTS

The service provider agreement in the PCV/QUC structure draws upon a trend within higher education of increasingly deep partnerships between universities and external for-profit organizations. Two common areas for these partnerships are in recruitment and online project management (OPM) services. Examples of OPM services include Pearson, Coursera, and 2U. Some services are more structurally integrated, such as the case of the Minerva Project, which developed the online platform and curricular content licensed to Minerva University. The Minerva Project leverages the academic successes of Minerva University to develop its own OPM services, offering “entirely custom curriculum design, as well as an array of pre-designed curriculum modules. These modular courses, which are derived from the undergraduate and graduate curricula at Minerva University, enable the rapid creation of new programs and institutions” (Minerva). Minerva is an example of an institution with a designed structural relationship with a service provider.



There are several other embedded service provider relationships wherein not-for-profit institutions purchase the assets of for-profit institutions under conditions of continued services and attendant fees to the for-profit. These include the Purdue University purchase of Kaplan University with provisions for a Kaplan company to provide services, including recruiting, and the University of Arizona acquisition of Ashford for a nominal sale price conditional upon Ashford owner Zovio retaining online licensing (Hill, 2022). The latter arrangement was seemingly unsuccessful, as in 2022 Zovio dissolved (Schwartz, September 2022a).

The relationship between Grand Canyon Education (GCE) and Grand Canyon University (GCU) provides one example of a service provider arrangement that is far more embedded and controlling. This relationship was the model for the partnership proposal PCV provided to QUC, as well as a subsequent partnership PCV entered into with the faith-based institution The King's College (TKC) in New York City. PCV provided a line of credit to TKC secured by their real estate assets, entered an OPM agreement where they would reportedly take 95% of the revenue, and contractually controlled a majority of Board of Governors seats (Moody, March 2023a). In April 2023, TKC split ties with PCV, and in May 2023 required substantial fundraising to avoid closure (Moody, April 2023b).

The institution currently called GCU began as a not-for-profit private institution, and in the early twenty-first century changed to a for-profit company, eventually becoming publicly traded on the NASDAQ exchange under the symbol LOPE. In 2018, the institution restructured to separate Grand Canyon University (GCU) as a not-for-profit institution from the publicly traded Grand Canyon Education (GCE). The mechanism of the transaction—outlined in a Securities and Exchange Commission filing—involved selling Grand Canyon University to a new nonprofit entity (Grand Canyon Education, 2018). The nonprofit organization received the name GCU along with a transfer of assets and liabilities. GCE transferred the campus lands and academic assets with a book value between \$850 and \$880 million to GCU in exchange for a secured credit note with a 6% interest rate. In addition, a significant amount of labour contracts was transferred to GCU (35% or 1400 full time positions plus 100% or 6000 part time positions). Finally, GCU entered a long-term (15 year) “Master Services Agreement” wherein GCE provides a “bundle of services” ranging from technology, marketing, financial aid processing, and academic programme development and training. For these services, GCU pays 60% of tuition and fee revenue to GCE. The 2018 structure transformed GCE

into the structure of an OPM with one large client. GCE has since added a second client (McKenzie, 2020).

This arrangement has several benefits for GCE. They can carry on their existing business while offloading some liabilities and also deriving financial benefit through service fees. In a 2021 earnings call, they identified three pillars of the company: GCU on campus, GCU online, and OPM services. However, the GCU/GCE structure has also received scrutiny for the closeness of the two organizations. While the 2018 regulatory filing makes an effort to separate the governance of both organizations, Brian M. Mueller remained in the dual role of CEO of GCE and President of GCU. Additionally, the relationship between the organizations created scrutiny about the nonprofit status of GCU and the benefits that GCE receives from their close association with a not-for-profit.

Shortly after the 2018 filing, Georgetown law professor Brian Galle (2018) wrote a letter to the US Department of Education asking “authorities to scrutinize conversions of currently for-profit institutions into putative non-profits” and also scrutinize “non-profit or public educational institutions with extensive contractual or other financial relationships with profit-seeking firms, in order to ensure that organizations that hold themselves out as charitable or public in fact are operated without regard for profit” (p. 1, 2). Galle argues that the mission of a not-for-profit is difficult to fulfil with structural dependency on a for-profit organization: “non-profit GCU is wholly dependent on and indentured to for-profit GCU. It will be exceedingly difficult for the non-profit to make annual \$48 million debt-service payments when its free cash flows are limited to the residual earnings it retains after turning over 50% of gross revenue from most sources to the for-profit” (p. 4). Additionally, the basic functions of the institutions cannot be undertaken without GCE: “Non-profit GCU will be dependent on the for-profit for essential services, such as student recruitment. Under these facts, there is no reason to believe that the new GCU will behave as a non-profit organization. It is financially and practically beholden to a for-profit partner” (p. 4).

In 2019, the US Department of Education rejected GCU’s request to be considered a not-for-profit under Title IV, “determining in an 18-page letter that the services contract with GCE was primarily intended to ‘drive shareholder value’ for the company, with the university as ‘its captive client—potentially in perpetuity.’” (Schwartz, December 2022b) Despite appeals from GCU, in late 2022 a federal judge upheld the decision to treat GCU as a for-profit institution under Title IV. For the time being, it

appears that this structure is profitable for GCE, but it is unclear what ability the curricular mission of the university has to influence institutional decisions.

The QUC/PCV agreements retain important elements of the Grand Canyon structure, making Quest a “captive client” unable to undertake essential functions, including recruiting without the partner, “potentially in perpetuity.” The independence of QUC enables the university to protect its academic quality, but it is subject to continued demands of a partner that controls revenue streams and charges significant fees. Unlike GCE, PCV was unable to bring enough revenue to the university to cover the fees from debt servicing to service fees to rent.

The PCV agreements enabled QUC to exist for two and a half additional academic years and enabled many more students to graduate with a Quest University degree: 30% of all Quest graduates finished after insolvency. However, even if PCV had been more successful in recruiting and revenue generation, the structure of the agreements was unlikely to lead to long-term success because the for-profit partner did not have motives aligned with the university. Institutions that are struggling have the responsibility to consider all options and the legacy of the institution and should do so before they are in the position to continue only through becoming a captive client to another entity, potentially compromising their mission in the process.

## LEGACY, PARTNERSHIPS, AND INNOVATIVE EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

Quest University’s struggles fit into a wider context of institutions exploring partnerships and other innovations in an attempt to achieve sustainability. Institutions who self-define as “innovative” or “mission driven” might have an even more difficult time responding to financial challenges, as their commitment to educational mission may mask the need to respond to financial challenges until a time of distress when options have diminished. In this final section, I draw out four key conclusions that the case study of QUC provides institutional leaders to help them evaluate their own institutions and inform decision-making.

### *1. Avoid structures with conflicts*

Quest University's history has been marked by conflicts that have impaired its ability to be sustainable. One through line of this chapter is the intersection of people who have, at one time, enabled QUC's existence, exerting influence to the detriment of the institution at another time. QUC has had founders, donors, board members, and partners who have invested time and effort in the institution, taken risks to enable its continued existence, yet also taken action that prevented QUC from becoming sustainable. The key is that these complexities were enabled by the university entering into conflicted structures that enabled some of those closest to it to exert continued influence. No matter how good- or ill-intentioned any of these players were towards the institution, the legal arrangements created the structures where it was inevitable that at some juncture personal interests would come into conflict with the interests of the institution. It is useful to look into past decisions critically with an aim to understand the context decisions were made in. At many stages, it could be argued that the university had no choice but to enter into certain agreements, and—like the PCV agreements—they were entered into out of necessity and with an awareness of possible outcomes. In the case of QUC, it seems that the structure of conflict at the founding of the institution was never overcome and attempts to exit this initial conflict resulted in the creation of more conflicts. It is therefore critical that institutional leaders examine the structures of their current institutions, identity and (if possible) address any structural conflicts and ensure that new agreements do not create conflicts with future implications.

## *2. Take action before it is too late*

Quest University's CCAA process was successful in terms of financial restructuring, successful in retaining the academic vision of the institution, but unsuccessful in restructuring with a partnership to create a sustainable future. In debriefing the CCAA process, our main takeaway was that QUC should have gone through the restructuring process five or more years earlier than it did. This may have been difficult for leadership to consider when QUC was still in the initial growth cycle of student numbers and at a time that—while continually posting operating losses—the institution had not accumulated as much debt. However, at the time, perhaps the belief in the institutional mission made it more difficult to take stock of the current situation and consider expanding the ways the mission could be fulfilled. Perhaps there was hope that one more year of building and

holding on to the valuable mission will make the difference in turning the institution to sustainability.

Mark Drozdowski writes that the telltale signs of an institution under stress that may be headed towards closure include “lacking a national reputation, relying heavily on tuition income to fuel the school budget, discounting tuition above 40% to attract students, having a small endowment and significant debt, and lacking online programs to produce revenue” (Drozdowski, 2022). These conditions existed for each of the 16 years that QUC offered academic programming. Institutional leaders should critically examine trends in their institution and in the higher education sector, be humble and realistic enough to explore all options, restructure from a position of strength, and remember that an institutional mission can only be fulfilled by a financially sustainable institution.

### *3. Change does not mean a lack of mission fulfilment*

A common trait of innovative universities is the tendency to innovate once and struggle to significantly innovate again. Sometimes these institutions respond to challenges by further entrenching into their founding mission, in the process missing that the institution was founded on innovation and that further innovation is required to fulfil the mission. The result is that some innovative institutions resist change, and that resistance to change has two significant consequences. First, a resistance to change can do a disservice to students and in the process move the institution further from their mission to educate students. Second, clinging to mission can be at the detriment of financial sustainability. Soliday and Lombardi (2019) call on institutions to make change: “In order for us to be responsible to our missions and the students of the future, we must radically transform our approach to the business of our institutions, with intense focus on prioritizing strategy, centralizing decision-making, building partnerships, and realigning budgetary processes with difference-making initiatives.” One may disagree with some of their conclusions of the mechanics of a successful “pivot,” but the case studies presented in the book provide multiple examples of institutions that were able to better serve students, fulfil the institutional mission, and become financially sustainable by identifying the need to change early and executing the change. At mission-driven institutions, leaders should work with their faculty, staff, students, and alumni to encourage them to see change and continued innovation as necessary for mission fulfilment.

#### 4. *Consider legacy*

QUC did not have a provisional planning or student continuation plan policy in place until late 2022. It is crucial that institutions undertake advance planning for worst-case outcomes and consider a range of programme or institutional closure scenarios. Closure of a programme or institution might never be considered a positive outcome, but some endings are worse than others. A good closure scenario is one that honours the work of the institution. This includes the mission of the institution and influence on the higher education community, the alumni that studied at the institution, the faculty and staff central to executing the institutional mission, and those including donors who supported the continued operation of the institution.

A good closure scenario also considers what happens to students in the midst of an academic program. With the rise of programme and institutional closures, regulators, including the Higher Learning Commission, have developed sets of tools for institutions to develop procedures for provisional plans and teach outs (Higher Learning Commission). Institutions should also examine models of how other institutions have left legacies and consider how—should the worst happen—the institution might best serve constituencies in closure. During 2020 and in 2023, I drafted and presented “good closure” models. These were critical in preparing for and executing the suspension of academic operations and supporting students to graduate or transfers to other institutions. Transfer facilitation required significant partnership work with other institutions, as did the transfer of student records to other institutions to enable student access to their transcripts in the future. Good closures have costs and planning is important to ensure that even worse scenarios—such as suddenly closing during a semester—do not occur. Closure plans need to consider the practicalities of the suspension of studies and should also consider the legacy of the institution.

One legacy model is to honour the work done, and hope to spark a legacy through the future influence of students, faculty, and staff. This model here is Black Mountain College, an institution that continues to get discussed despite closing nearly 70 years ago (Fortini, 2022). Another model is to (if possible) go dormant for a period of time to restructure and rebirth in another form, as has been done by Antioch College. This approach is being explored by QUC. A third option is a partnership with a larger institution wherein the smaller institution becomes an affiliated

college or department that is an incubator or serves a special purpose within the larger institution. The “New College” institutions (including New College Alabama, represented in this volume) each have distinct histories, but represent examples of this structure. However, this structure is unlikely to occur unless it is pursued at a much earlier stage than closure. Finally, there is the option for a preferred teach out or strategic merger. The latter can only work if the institution has a set of assets remaining to donate to another institution, who assumes a certain percentage of faculty and staff contracts and continues offering the programme to students, as in the case of the Marlborough College merger into Emerson College (Seitz, 2020). Alternatively, a preferred teach out such as the one Prescott College offered to Green Mountain College and to Quest enabled students to continue their academic programme without losing time to degree completion (Young, 2019). It is critical that leaders create provisional plans, and if they cannot find a way forward consider their legacy.

In conclusion, institutional leadership from Board members to administration to faculty and staff all need to take a critical view of their current institutional structure and consider whether it is realistically on a sustainable path. If it is not sustainable, the board should not hesitate to make a change. While change may be especially challenging within a mission-oriented institution, the Board and leadership should be transparent about why change is being made and how it corrects the current unsustainable path. Partnerships should be considered—and we may see an increase in partnerships and mergers in the coming years—but the motivations of partnerships and potential conflicts should be closely examined. There is great promise in structures of shared services and shared courses between aligned institutions, but institutions should be wary of entering into partnerships that limit their ability for changes in the future. The case study of QUC provides one more data point of an institution with exceptional teaching and learning that throughout its history entered partnerships that limited future options. QUC also would have benefited by looking to make change before it was necessary when it had more financial leverage. If QUC had initiated searches for partners and monetization of land several years before it did, the institution would have had far more leverage and the outcome might be different, and perhaps QUC might continue to be welcoming students to its exceptional academic programme on a stunning campus. In a nutshell, one thing is clear: universities will struggle to fulfil their missions if they are financially captive to non-aligned partners, and innovative institutions need to be innovative both in their curriculum

and in the ways they operate. Put another way, educational idealism must be paired with fiscal realism for sustainable innovative institutions.

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# Assessment, Outcomes, and Innovation in Higher Education

*Zeke Bernstein*

## THE VALUE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

There is much in the news these days about the value of post-secondary education. Prospective students and parents look at spiraling tuition costs and the incomes of recent graduates, and ask appropriately whether the return on investment is worth it. Accreditors and policymakers look at dismal graduation rates and loan burden, and push institutions to improve completion rates, and at less cost. Even educators and administrators themselves would be right to wonder whether their institution is effective in producing the sort of outcomes they want for their students, to say nothing of what and whether students actually learn (Arum & Roksa, 2011).

Unsurprisingly, this focus on value and outcomes has come to be reflected in the ways colleges are ranked and evaluated. U.S. News and World Report has shifted its ranking system to be more outcomes-focused—retention and graduation rates now make up a third of the

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overall score colleges receive, with factors like selectivity or alumni giving making up little to none of the score (U.S. News and World Report, 2022). The graduation rates of Pell grant recipients now also factor in the rankings as a social mobility dimension, emphasizing the important role colleges and universities have in supporting this population of students. Accreditors have likewise shifted away from a focus on inputs and have moved toward a more balanced view of quality that incorporates processes and outputs. Bennington College's accreditor, for instance, the New England Commission of Higher Education, explicitly encourages its reviewers to "go beyond inputs and processes ... to focus increasingly on outcomes" (NECHE Evaluation Manual, 2021), and indeed, assessment of student learning—and other—outcomes is a key component of the standards on the academic program and overall educational effectiveness.

But what is troubling—at least for those who might seek to take an expansive view of the purpose and value of higher education—is the emphasis on postgraduate income and employment as primary outcomes of a college education. This is evident in both the higher education and lay presses, and even—increasingly—in various college rankings schemes that have emerged in recent years. Prominent among these is the United States government's own College Scorecard, which tracks cost of attendance alongside alumni income based on tax return filings, inviting a more or less direct calculation of return on investment. Recent versions of the Scorecard have these data disaggregated by field of study, and an advanced search allows one to filter by alumni income, which prospective students might use to narrow their college choice down to majors and schools that promise to earn them the most.

None of this is new, and it is not necessarily bad. Higher education has long been viewed as an engine for economic mobility, and sophisticated analyses can now show a student's likelihood of moving from one income quintile to another based on the college they attend (Chetty et al., 2017). To the extent that colleges seek to transform the economic futures of their students, we should be looking carefully at data that tell us how well we're doing as a sector, if not as individual institutions. The trouble will—and has—come when well-intentioned policymakers, college administrators, or the general public use these sorts of data to prioritize (and limit) possible educational pathways. Indeed, higher education has already started down this path, with institutions narrowing their own views of what success looks like; and a casual review of many college websites reveals a focus on income, employment, and job prospects. Data are often collected with

nationally-normed first-destination surveys, which the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) will gladly accept as it publishes its yearly report on employment prospects for students. With this focus on return on investment, colleges are cutting majors in response to waning demand, particularly in areas that are perceived as holding less value for college graduates. This inevitably limits choices for students, and may also make it more difficult to innovate—a sort of flattening of higher education into a narrow set of educational approaches, disciplines, or institutions that promise to earn students the most.

What then happens to innovation in higher education, and how do we think about the effectiveness of certain innovations when the outcomes that we seek for our students are more limited? Should all innovations be directed toward improved job prospects and earnings? If that's the goal, is higher education even the right context to consider or prioritize innovation? And what of historical innovations—models of progressive education, say—and the impact they've had (and continue to have) on students, student learning, and outcomes? In the pages that follow, I'll argue that we need to expand the set of metrics we test and track if we're to ensure a vibrant, innovative, and student-focused higher educational ecosystem. Progressive education, which emerged at various points and in various forms in the past 100 years, may give us clues as to the best ways to do this; and indeed, considering outcomes within the context of the progressive liberal arts is critical and timely, for both the sake of progressive institutions themselves, as well as higher education more generally. As someone who works in—and thinks a lot about the outcomes of—progressive education, I'll start there, and address my colleagues who might be asking questions about matters of educational and institutional effectiveness. I'll then expand into a broader discussion of outcomes, assessment, and the value of higher education more generally.

## THE OUTCOMES OF INNOVATION

An increasing focus on outcomes in higher education presents an urgent and vexing set of questions for the liberal arts in general and the progressive liberal arts in particular. Colleges that label themselves as progressive often end up near the top of the list when schools are sorted by tuition, and near the bottom when they are sorted by alumni earnings. (My institution, Bennington College, once held the dubious distinction of being the most expensive college in the United States—a distinction it still

cannot shake even though it has not been at the top of that list in 30+ years.) The question of return on investment is more pressing than ever. And yet, for right or for wrong, the focus among progressive liberal arts schools historically has been on the process by which students learn rather than the outcomes we want for our students. Progressive schools tout, for example, innovations like individualized approaches to learning, the close collaboration between students and faculty, and the ability to pursue education in an environment that bridges the curriculum and co-curriculum in an integrated fashion. Indeed, these seem to be the attributes that draw students to the progressive liberal arts.

Still, there is a hushed exceptionalism about who these innovations are for, and there are pervasive narratives on certain campuses about “fit” and those students who can—and more importantly cannot—“do” progressive education. Graduation rates are good but not great, and retention strategies at these schools are often admissions-based: using microtargeting strategies to find the small number of self-selected students who are a good fit for this educational model, instead of looking inward to identify those structures that need strengthening to support an increasingly diverse population of students. One could argue that progressive schools—which once led an innovative movement in higher education—have struggled to innovate in recent years, even as their innovations are co-opted by other schools.

What is the end game here? An exclusive, not-for-everyone education that seems to have little return on investment, at least in the monetary sense? It is a losing proposition, and one we—as innovators in higher education—must seek to unpack and address. As we have learned elsewhere in this volume, many progressive liberal arts colleges were founded on the premise—and promise—of a better way to educate students; some were founded with an explicit focus on experimentation and innovation, often in response to a real or perceived gap within the higher educational landscape; a few even elaborated specific structures to support ongoing experimentation and evaluation, or were the subject of research studies based on their innovative pedigree. The implicit hypothesis of course is that students who move through a progressive educational environment are better off than those who do not. But who defines “better off” in this context, and in what terms? Improved learning in college? Better quality of life afterwards? These questions—some of which were probably posed in the founding of progressive institutions of higher education—have not been

adequately answered. That our definitions of success have evolved over time complicates the matter further.

Yet in this climate, enrollment managers, academic leaders, college presidents, and others across higher education are increasingly faced with questions from prospective students about what they might expect to gain from their not insubstantial investment. Vague responses about “learning to stand on two feet” or “lifelong learning” are insufficient, and the data on employment and earnings (as above) can paint a bleak picture of post-graduate outcomes. This, perhaps, is why progressive institutions tend to lean on process and structure more than outcomes—in some ways selling the innovation, not the product—even as some of their early innovations (the self-designed major, say) are now widespread in higher education. As several institutions across the progressive liberal arts have merged with other schools or closed outright in recent years, it is clear we need other ways to measure and describe what differentiates us within a very crowded marketplace—a challenge, perhaps, for any school that might seek to innovate. How do we describe innovations in ways that resonate with—and appeal to—our students?

## ASSESSMENT AND OUTCOMES

Measuring—assessing—both the process and products of student learning holds the key to understanding and supporting student success, and to the demonstration of value that is critical in today’s focus on outcomes and return on investment. In fact, assessment might helpfully be used to address long-standing hypotheses about how our particular innovations benefit our students. And yet, within certain educational circles, assessment is much maligned (Gilbert, 2019), viewed as time-consuming, expensive, reductive, or methodologically flawed. Some of this is grounded in legitimate concerns about whether we can capture or quantify the true nature of student learning, some in not entirely unfounded concerns that assessment data might be used for more sinister purposes—like faculty tenure and promotion, program cuts, or resource allocation. Still, how else to answer fundamental questions about how our students are transformed if not through rigorous, thoughtful measurement? Below I explore how this is presently operationalized in certain progressive liberal arts institutions before taking a more expansive view of how assessment might be used in interconnected ways to elevate our understanding of student learning and outcomes across all of higher education.

In the broadest sense, assessment in higher education can take two general forms: (1) the evaluation of student learning that can be used in formative ways to enhance the education of our students, individually and in the aggregate; and (2) the assessment of alumni outcomes that captures summative data on what our graduates do after they leave college. Both are needed, and ideally they connect and form throughlines that link the structures we use to educate our students with the outcomes (learning and otherwise) that we want for our students. In fact, the strongest assessment will be used in ongoing “quality improvement” loops to test, re-test, and calibrate certain educational structures by looking at the outcomes (learning and otherwise) of students who participate in some of those structures.

Though straightforward to describe in general terms, these forms of assessment are a complicated endeavor under the best of circumstances. They require that an institution understands—and agrees upon—what they want students to learn in their time at college, as well as the aspirations for them after they graduate. They require the elaboration of learning outcomes, the development and testing of assessment instruments, and the use of tools to track and record alumni outcomes. And they require a clear understanding of mission—both individually as institutions and as part of the broader higher educational ecosystem. In this climate of accountability that characterizes higher education today, colleges and universities find themselves at different stages of a sort of assessment journey—building capacity for meaningful assessment, engaging internal constituencies, and developing assessment tools to track student progress and outcomes. How this plays out at individual institutions will say a lot about how they respond to questions from the outside about value.

The key innovation of the progressive liberal arts—individualized programs of study—makes meaningful assessment at once more complicated and more important for institutions as they support student success and describe their value in ways that are legible to prospective students and parents. It is more complicated because learning outcomes could in principle be different between students, may shift over time, or emerge flexibly from the individual courses of study, all depending on particular academic or institutional structures. This of course makes reliable measurement and feedback all the more important. When expectations might differ between students, providing guideposts and guardrails for students where they can see and understand progress is important not just for supporting their success but also for understanding—at the institutional level—how our students are doing. These data should then feed back into ongoing



institutional effectiveness efforts—changes to the curriculum, shifts in academic structures, and improvements in how we support students and their success.

Student learning is assessed in different places and at different “levels” in colleges and universities: within courses, in and across various programs or majors, and at an overall institutional level. Learning outcomes that are defined and assessed at these various levels help to guide curricular scaffolding, faculty development and pedagogy, and student support—all the while ensuring that every student achieves the learning goals we set out for them. At many schools in the Consortium for Innovative Environments in Learning (CIEL), assessment is centered at the course level through narrative evaluations—brief synopses written by faculty that describe student learning and/or progress. Institutional learning outcomes, meanwhile, can serve to align structures across the curriculum and co-curriculum, ensuring that students have access to the experiences necessary to achieve the learning outcomes we expect them to achieve. Program-level assessment, which sits in between course and institutional level assessment, is more complicated. Since individual courses of study replace conventional majors at most CIEL schools, program-level assessment can be a nebulous concept, and there exists a significant (and often unresolved) tension between the goals students lay out in their courses of study, and the definitions and expectations around rigorous academic work within traditional academic disciplines. Here we rely on faculty organized by department to situate the individualized academic pursuits of students within the expectations or requirements of their discipline. This alignment can often break down in cases of interdisciplinary work—which many of our schools encourage—and here we might look to translate institutional learning outcomes into discipline-specific language to help guide the work within particular departments.

Assessment of student learning, especially in the progressive liberal arts, also invites questions of what qualifies as success. At Bennington College, for example, we’ve had spirited debates about whether students need to achieve certain thresholds of student learning—especially in terms of institutional learning outcomes—or whether it is sufficient to demonstrate continued growth across the four years. Our working hypothesis is that defining success in terms of growth allows any student to succeed (some more than others, of course), whereas setting thresholds might set certain students up for failure, while also “flattening” the experience and expectations for all students—a sort of regression to a mean rather than a more

flexible and student-centered approach to learning and assessment. Which approach is better remains a question, but our approach to assessment stands in contrast to, say, competency-based education, which is focused on achieving and demonstrating very specific thresholds of learning. The implications for learning and learning assessment—and for education in general—are significant.

What students learn in college—as assessed through the approaches outlined above—should in principle connect to the outcomes we want for our students after college, but here is where our approach to assessment might seem disjointed. Most often, alumni outcomes are operationalized in terms of income and employment as measured through alumni surveys, though many liberal arts colleges also track graduate school attendance, competitive fellowships (Fulbright, Rhodes, etc.), or volunteer service opportunities (Teach for America, Peace Corps, etc.), as expressions of mission. Sometimes these are measured within a year of graduation, though tracking alumni further out often provides a fuller picture. At Bennington, we are interested in whether our alumni are involved in the arts, volunteerism, and ongoing collaboration with other graduates—and we track these five, ten, and fifteen years after graduation. These metrics emerged from conversation with our community about what we value among the alumni that we produce (see also below).

Other novel approaches for looking at impact have emerged recently, and have sought to go deeper than the metrics described above. In 2014, Gallup partnered with Purdue University to launch the Gallup-Purdue index, a study of 50,000 college graduates which tracked workplace engagement and overall well-being, along with information about their college experience (Gallup-Purdue Index Report, 2014). Unsurprisingly perhaps, this study found that what matters for graduates is not *where* they went to college, but the types of experiences they had *during* college—particularly, strong mentorship and opportunities for experiential learning. (Not incidentally, these two types of experiences, along with others the Gallup-Purdue index identified, are hallmarks of the progressive liberal arts experience.) Meanwhile, the Career Leadership Collective, a research and consulting firm, launched their National Alumni Career Mobility survey, which goes beyond first-destination surveys to track career trajectory, satisfaction, and engagement; it also seeks to link these outcomes with experiences students had in college. Both the Gallup-Purdue and Career Leadership Collective efforts imply there is room for colleges and universities to take a more nuanced and fine-grained look at what their alumni do

after graduation, with implications both for the innovative and progressive liberal arts and for institutions of higher education in general.

### TOWARD A UNIFIED VIEW OF FLEXIBLE, STUDENT-CENTERED ASSESSMENT

In considering the many dimensions of student learning and success—as measured through the approaches outlined above—there emerges significant potential misalignment between what students want, what colleges and universities value, and what society perceives as important. How institutions of higher education navigate these tensions will have a profound impact on how we understand and communicate the value of higher education generally and of the progressive liberal arts in particular. Importantly, it may also shift the prevailing narrative toward a more balanced view of education as both a public and private good, instead of one that is meant (just) to provide a better income and better job. In the pages that follow, I will take a broader view of assessment, and argue that institutions of higher education in general need to innovate not just in what they measure but how; and that some of the principles of progressive education can be applied to the way we understand and track outcomes among our students.

As institutions contemplate student outcomes, the most innovative responses will rest on four pillars: understanding what students want, understanding the marketplace, knowing what one's institution stands for, and rigorous assessment. These pillars support (and are supported by) a kind of thoughtful and rigorous debate about the value and purpose of higher education, the relationship between individuals and community, and the role of an educated citizenry—in words often attributed to Thomas Jefferson—in supporting democracy and freedom. This debate also addresses the tension between education as a pre-professional endeavor, and education as preparation for a life of holistic and meaningful engagement in the world around us. Many of us who teach in the liberal arts want the latter for our students; increasingly, students and parents are looking for the former; the pillars described below create space for productive dialogue at the space that resides in between.

Understanding our students, their values and aspirations, and what they hope to gain in and through their time at college is foundational to understanding the extent to which we're measuring the right things. This

is particularly true for those of us at institutions that allow for significant student agency, as our students are more likely than most to bring their own values to the shared endeavor of education, and similarly, to want those values reflected in the institution they choose. None of this is meant to argue that our students should dictate our values—only that a nuanced understanding of the range of values and expectations among our students should be an important part of the conversation.

The first place we might see into these expectations is through surveys or focus groups of students—incoming students, current students, and former students—using closed- and open-ended questions that ask them about their values and belief sets. The CIRP Freshman Survey out of UCLA’s Higher Education Research Institute, for example, asks a number of questions about why students are attending college in general, and the reasons for attending their chosen institution in particular. These data, particularly when benchmarked against national or peer data (as CIRP will do), provide a fascinating lens into what our students want out of their time at college. At Bennington, for instance, previous administrations of the CIRP Freshman Survey have shown that our students are much more motivated by the possibility of becoming a more cultured person or making a difference in the world than they are by getting a better job or making more money. It feels important to listen to those voices as we contemplate measures of student—and institutional—success.

A second pillar looks at the broader marketplace of potential students, and asks what they are looking for in and as a result of their education. Some—perhaps many or even most—students will say better salaries or improved job prospects (indeed, national CIRP Freshman Survey data validates this trend in a general way). But it also feels that a new generation of students is emerging—students who are much more socially engaged and who want to make a difference; students who have lived through a post-9/11 security state, a financial crash (or two), an ongoing climate crisis, a pandemic, a series of racial reckonings; students who want more accountability from the adults in the room—in short, students who are not content just to sit and absorb information for four years. It will be fascinating to see the sort of educational experiences these students seek out in the coming years—and of course the institutions that rise to meet that demand.

Beyond a better understanding of the students we might seek to recruit, a third pillar is one of institutional self-reflection—a sort of clarity and shared understanding of what institutions value in and for students. This

self-reflective process might involve the following questions, asked of each other at the most senior levels of our administrations, in boardrooms and faculty meetings, and elsewhere throughout the institution: What do we want for our students? How is that reflected in our mission and values, and in the data we collect and publicize about outcomes? Are we intentional about whether and how these things align? Most mission statements—at least in the liberal arts—do not often include statements about better salaries or preparation for the world of work. And yet, on our websites, a few clicks away, are data on income and employment rates as primary outcomes of our students. Where is this dissonance felt in the institution? Often this reflective practice reveals structures that are working in disjointed ways, or worse, against each other. I don't suggest here—or really anywhere in this chapter—a particular way to resolve this; only that the institutions that have honest and fulsome conversations about what they value will be better poised to have those values reflected across the institution. Perhaps these conversations lead to refined mission or values statements; perhaps they support better alignment between academic and non-academic centers at the college (between career services staff and the work of the faculty, for instance). Likely they will give rise to better and more incisive assessment tools, with greater buy-in, and greater interest in the data they generate.

And this leads then to the fourth pillar, which is a precondition in some ways for the other three, and also emerges from them—and that is a structure for rigorous and thoughtful assessment and a culture of measurement that supports it. For it is only through quality assessment that we can understand the alignment between our values, our students, and their outcomes. Institutions of higher education—indeed, most institutions anywhere—generate vast quantities of data; the gap often exists in the capacity (and sometimes the will) to manage, analyze, synthesize, and share that data in ways that make it usable. Fortunately, people in roles like mine (overseeing institutional research, planning, and assessment) stand at the ready, and institutional research in general has evolved significantly in recent years, from a field that was generally limited to data collection and reporting, to one that supports decision-making, educational effectiveness, and quality assurance efforts across the institution (Volkwein, 2008). There exists one (and often more) office at most institutions that can serve as a partner in understanding what and how our students are learning, and whether (and how) that learning is translating into meaningful lives for our alumni.

But quality assessment is more than just one person—or one office—and depends instead on faculty and academic administrators who are committed to learning assessment, institutional leaders who embrace data-informed decision-making, and an institution that is willing to look deeply at whether and how students benefit from their education. The other pillars are crucial here—for it is through the discussions outlined above (on mission, on understanding our students and the marketplace, etc.) that a culture of meaningful assessment can develop.

At that point, it becomes a question of tools, many of which already exist in the form of first-year surveys, focus groups, alumni interviews, and the like. But it is also the case that the toolset is too limited and narrowly focused, and higher education would do well to expand its arsenal of assessments that get at the transformation we seek for our students. We might look toward measures of metacognitive development or other non-cognitive assessments—psychometric tools that allow us to see into the sort of skill development that supports student success. Among alumni, a measure of “impact” would be useful, similar to the impact factor academic publications receive. How are our alumni woven into the fabric of their communities? What sort of imprint do they leave? What sort of change do they make in the world? Measures like this might help to shift the narrative among prospective students from “What am I going to get out of college” to “How will this college help me to make a difference in the lives of others?”

### COMMUNICATING THE VALUE OF INNOVATION

What many progressive liberal arts institutions have gotten right is the emphasis on students as agents of their own education. Our innovation in some ways is that we trust and empower students to develop a line of inquiry and work closely with faculty, advisors, and peers to design and implement a course of study that crosses disciplines, engages different approaches, and bridges the curriculum and co-curriculum. Implicit in this design is that both the process and products of learning can be different for every student. Students can engage different content in different ways and at different times—a degree of flexibility that conventional majors cannot afford—and they can demonstrate mastery in different ways, and also at different times. Assessment is at once more complicated and more important in this context, but so too are the definitions of success toward which our assessments point. Indeed, the very definition of

*student success* may be different for every student. This both further complicates but also enriches the nature of the assessment work that we do.

Can we imagine a model of teaching and learning where this approach is taken to its limits? Students could be asked when they arrive on campus what they hope to achieve in and through their time at college, and to use this as a touchstone as they move through their four years. It might be revised at times—learning outcomes added or removed, career aspirations layered in or not, goals around happiness and self-fulfillment strengthened—but critically, it would be used to shape how a student moves through coursework, internships, and the co-curricular. Institutions would necessarily need to adapt as well—and not just the colleges and universities, but accreditors and government agencies which play a quality assurance role. As more students define their own success in different ways, institutions might shift away from an ever-dwindling number of metrics (Are you employed? How much money do you make?), and instead be held accountable to how well they are letting students achieve the goals that they set for themselves.

This would also have interesting effects on how we think about notions of rigor, disciplinarity, and expertise, the very stalwarts of traditional education as we now understand it. Students may find themselves at disciplinary crossroads that haven't been mapped yet, as they apply their own aspirations and definitions of success to push their (and our) understanding within certain fields. In these unexplored interdisciplinary landscapes, assessment itself would have to evolve, as we seek to understand and validate the learning that is taking place. Relatedly, we would need to find ways to measure outcomes that matter to individual students, outcomes we may have never contemplated in our assessment work. This, in some ways, would be the true innovation of the progressive liberal arts: a means for students to tell us what we do not know, along with an invitation to measure what we've never thought to assess.

In this chapter, I have argued that understanding the outcomes of innovative, progressive liberal arts institutions is critical in the support of students and in the telling of our story to the world. A corollary of this argument is that at its core, the promise of the progressive liberal arts is that it accommodates and encourages a range of possible outcomes for our students. We should seek to leverage this as an asset—and not a liability—in a higher educational landscape that is very quickly regressing into narrow definitions of success for our students. In our conversations with prospective students and parents, we should allay concerns about

employability and salary, and then redirect to the wonderful reality that students can come into the progressive liberal arts and self-actualize in ways that simply aren't possible anywhere else. We should make very public pronouncements—on our websites, in Op-Eds, and elsewhere—about the progressive liberal arts as a place where students can identify and realize the outcomes that matter to them most. And of course we should seek to balance what we want for students with what students want for themselves, and ensure this balance is manifest in our educational structures, our pedagogy, and our use of assessment. This, perhaps, is one lesson that all of higher education would do well to embrace.

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# Beyond “Innovation”: Lessons for Making Change in Higher Educational Institutions

Ryan Derby-Talbot  and Noah Coburn

## FACING CRISIS AND CHANGE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Colleges and universities are facing multiple challenges from a variety of directions simultaneously. There are pressures from increasing costs, decreasing public funding, technological disruptions, political intrusions, shifting demographic bases, increasing concerns about equity and accessibility, changing employment demands, and growing popular skepticism of the value of higher education as a whole (e.g., Alexander, 2020; Blumenstyk, 2014). The fallout of the pandemic has only inflamed many of these issues, resulting, for some, in potentially existential threats. Already many institutions—including many smaller institutions serving regional populations—have closed, and the trend is only growing

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(Lederman, 2021). Indeed, *Inside Higher Ed* recently ran a webinar called “Closing a College Wisely,” indicating the prevalence of this phenomenon.

What should institutions do in the face of these threats? Different institutions will require different strategies. Some institutions, namely, those that are elite and wealthy, will likely be able to stay their courses. Others, however, will need to consider changes at a variety of levels if they are to survive. For example, new populations of student applicants might need to be found; new academic programs created; new technologies incorporated for remote learning; partnerships sought and/or new sources of funding found; or curricula remodeled to focus on industry specific demands (e.g., tech-driven STEM education). However, just what changes an institution should consider, and how it should make those changes effectively, are not easy questions. The worst way to begin making change is by implementing new features—cosmetic “innovations”—without even asking these questions in the first place.

Here the lessons from innovative institutions can help. Colleges and universities need not resemble the institutions featured in this book in terms of size, curricular focus, or ethos to glean lessons about how to undertake institutional change effectively. Indeed, as the previous chapters have demonstrated, meaningful innovation is not (solely) the result of copying from elsewhere but from growing from the inside. It is by providing space for experimentation in service to deep institutional commitments that robust, inspiring, and insightful innovations are created, adapted, and refined. While the innovative approaches of the institutions featured in this book largely reflect a commitment to shared progressive values, the lessons are more broadly applicable to other institutions. In this chapter, we step back to look for the larger lessons from these experimental programs that can benefit institutions across higher education.

Innovation is not a benefit in and of itself. Not all colleges and universities need to aspire to have an innovative identity. Nonetheless, we argue that higher education benefits from innovative institutions. Innovative institutions, like those featured in this book, help grow new ideas, provide lived examples of institutional change, and ensure a wider range of educational opportunities for students. Their insights and experiences are especially important in times of widespread higher educational disruption.

The rest of this chapter provides lessons from innovative institutions that we hope will help those facing the need to make institutional change. In particular, we begin by describing several “headwinds” embedded in higher education that make institutional innovation difficult. Then we

describe how effective innovation is tied to institutional culture. After considering how other institutional factors such as leadership and size tie in to questions of innovation, we conclude by examining previous periods of significant change in higher education and what it means for the legacies of colleges and universities.

We love higher education and the opportunities it provides students. We want colleges and universities to be adaptable, long-lasting, and continually beneficial to humanity. When change is needed or desired, we want institutions to be able to go beyond cosmetic “innovations” in service to fundamental values at the heart of education. We hope that the hard-won lessons and perspectives we share can help contribute to a robust and prosperous future for higher education.

### HEADWINDS TO INNOVATION

As an industry, higher education is known to be conservative and slow to change. This is reflected by the fact that most modern colleges and universities’ models were developed in the late 1800s, based heavily on older models still—the German research university of the 1700s, and the monastic colleges of medieval Europe (Hofstadter, 1963). Indeed, despite massive technological changes over the past 40 years, many colleges and universities look strikingly similar to what they looked nearly like a century ago. Even online teaching and learning tend to primarily replicate what has been done in the in-person classroom.

The slow-to-change nature of most colleges and universities can be explained by examining certain structural challenges embedded in higher education. In particular, we draw attention here to three significant headwinds to innovation in higher education: an overemphasis of prestige, an overfixation on specialization, and an underexposure to methods for collective work outside of traditional committee work and meetings.

#### *Confronting the Overemphasis of Prestige*

In the business world, there is a wide variety of institutional types, organizational structures, and practices. Higher education, however, tends to have institutions that more reflect each other than distinguish themselves from each other. Why is this? The thesis of historian Michael Pak’s “Competition and Reform in Higher Education” article sheds light on this question:

One of the founding premises regarding competition—as to why it is beneficial to the customers—is that it leads to a greater variety of services offered by producers. Yet, this has not been true in higher education. In countries where universities have been allowed to compete freely, the predominant pattern has been a tendency toward institutional convergence, not institutional diversity or service differentiation. In such systems, it has been generally the case that the more universities compete, the more they imitate one another and become indistinguishable in the range of services they offer. (Pak, 2013, p. 280)

Pak's explanation for this trend of institutional convergence is based on the fact that, in higher education, the principle of competition is based on prestige. Citing Veblen (1918), he argues that all the competition between institutions in higher education for faculty, students, and resources is ultimately aimed at improving stature:

It is in terms of prestige, in other words, that the final score-keeping is done in higher education. The tendencies Veblen observed have become only more pronounced with time. In the United States, the success of a university is now measured, more than ever, in terms of how it ranks in influential evaluation reports like those published by the U.S. News and World Report. (Pak, 2013, p. 280)

Pak's argument is compelling. Given that colleges and universities are typically evaluated on the basis of reputation and rankings, what incentive do institutions have for trying new things? Those at the top of the rankings have little reason to alter what they are already doing; those trying to climb the rankings are doing so on the basis of standards set by those institutions at the top. Pak's article discusses how new institutions in international settings are overlooking questions of how best to adapt to local contexts, and instead aiming to replicate top-ranking institutions. Perhaps the recent trend of programs pulling out of U.S. News and World Report's rankings (Diep, 2022) suggests new opportunities for institutions to free themselves from the tyranny of the prestige mindset.

What might it look like for colleges and universities to free themselves from the primacy of pursuing prestige? An often overlooked sector of higher education, American community colleges, provides a clue. Since community colleges are developed to serve particular regions and populations, they often reflect characteristics befitting their localities rather than each other: for example, their sizes, programs offered, campuses, and

integration of faculty and staff with local industries and professions. As community colleges still remain fundamentally tied to the educational norms of four-year institutions where many of their students transfer, they reflect many of the “convergent” features shared across institutions. However, because their *telos* is based on service to local populations and not strictly on rankings, we see a natural diversity arise across their institutional forms.

As the example of community colleges suggests, innovation is tied to purpose. To the extent that higher educational institutions—particularly those featuring four-year undergraduate programs—remain fundamentally committed to rankings and reputation, their “innovations” will only reflect changes validated by those rankings. If, instead, institutions can articulate deeper commitments that transcend rankings, a higher educational ecosystem of broader and better educational opportunities for a diverse range of students is possible. The institutions featured in this book demonstrate that innovation naturally arises when deep commitments are given space for experimentation. The best thing institutions can do to innovate meaningfully is to provide committed groups of students, staff, and faculty the opportunity to participate in discovering alternative or experimental approaches to education in service to commitments to learning.

### *Transcending Specialization*

Another limitation to innovation in higher education is the value placed on specialization above other forms of professional and institutional identity. For individual faculty members, for example, specialization is the currency of the academic career. The prestige of an individual academic largely comes down to their disciplinary specialty, and their contributions to that field. Specialization is certainly valuable in the production of knowledge, and is enriching to the scholar. (We both love our specialized disciplinary research.) Specialization does not, however, place sufficient attention on the learning process of students, nor train one to be effective in undertaking broader institutional innovation.

Innovating on an institutional level requires skills that are not typically connected to a traditional academic training, for example: the contemplation of deep questions of education and institutional mission; reflection on educational practices and pedagogy; teamwork with stakeholders far removed from one’s base of expertise; willingness to try on new approaches

that one might be initially skeptical about or resistant to; taking pride in shared rather than individual successes. These skills can certainly be developed by any academic, but they need to be incentivized. Otherwise, it is easy for the traditional academic, who builds a reputation on the basis of individual specialization, to become overly invested in the infrastructure at the foundation of their individual specialization—departments, faculty ranks, physical resources, financial structures—making them inherently conservative toward preserving that infrastructure. In other words, innovation may potentially be seen as a threat to an academic who has built a career as a disciplinary specialist.

It is not necessary for academics to abandon disciplinary specialization, as it is—of course—the lifeblood of the profession. To the extent that identification with a disciplinary specialization becomes one's *sole* form of professional identity, however, is the extent to which one remains solely committed to the structures and practices that propagate work in their particular academic discipline. We have found that if academic faculty are able to see themselves beyond just a singular professional identity (identifying with a discipline)—say as part of an interdisciplinary team, as an advocate for new pedagogical approaches, or as a participant in a new initiative—new opportunities become possible. That is, if faculty are challenged with other questions of purpose—for example, about the impact of their classes on different populations of students, about the role of their discipline in grappling with larger and more entangled questions, about the communications they can make to other professionals beyond their academic colleagues, or about their role in establishing a larger institutional culture of inquiry—their disciplinary specializations become platforms from which they can engage in larger innovative questions and projects. What kinds of different structures and practices naturally emerge when these questions are tolerated and incentivized? Having seen this play out successfully at institutions featured in this volume, we are aware of the increased professional enrichment and satisfaction possible for those up to the challenge.

### *Diversifying Collective Work Practices*

The traditional unit for undertaking institutional work in most colleges and universities is the committee. Committees play important and valuable roles in any institution, and the matured and effective practices of well-run committees produce excellent work. This is especially true for

high stakes decision-making involving the standards of an institution—committees help ensure that hiring, promotion, dismissal, policy implementations and reviews, and disciplinary actions are taken with the utmost care in stewardship to the institution.

When it comes to innovation, however, committees *by themselves* are not an optimal format for undertaking change. Committees serve primarily as arenas for discussion, not experimentation. As is understood in the field of design, when it comes to creating new ideas, two phases are needed: a phase of divergence, when new ideas are considered, tolerated and tried, and a subsequent phase of convergence, where the best of those ideas is decided upon as the shared way forward (see, e.g., Interaction Design Foundation, 2020). Committee practices mostly facilitate the latter—the phase of convergence in making decisions. The committee dynamic, however, can be detrimental to the divergent phase. For instance, we have seen committees where new ideas for pedagogical approaches, classes, or curricular reorganization have been dismissed out of hand based on nothing more than untested opinion. Innovations rarely work seamlessly the first time they are tried, and effective innovators reflect a willingness or instinct to try out the ideas nonetheless, prioritizing the learning and further development they can gain from the experience. It is, for this reason, therefore important to counterbalance the work of committees in undertaking innovative work with separate arenas for the initial divergent work of brainstorming and experimentation.

At the institutional level, effective innovation can result from a variety of practices, including whole-scale adoption of new models (whereby faculty and students have to adjust to the features of that model), through pilot projects (whereby smaller groups of faculty and students have permission to try out new approaches without trade-off consequences), and shared design thinking-style activities (such as the co-design years of Olin College of Engineering and Fulbright University Vietnam, for example). We have seen, for example, an effective institutional practice where faculty are not allowed to vote on a new idea until a group has had the opportunity to pilot the idea, and report back on findings from their actual experience. Whether or not the project gets adopted, the faculty gain insights and new learning from the experiment.

The point is that innovation requires divergent arenas for experimentation as much as it requires committees for ultimate decision-making. The former is not typically part of traditional academic culture, but is necessary for those institutions wanting to consider effective innovation seriously.

Given these aforementioned headwinds, how can institutions successfully innovate? We turn to the lessons from small, experimental institutions, who have much to share with the rest of higher education.

### FACILITATING INSTITUTIONAL EXPERIMENTATION

The colleges featured in this book share some features (small sizes, interdisciplinarity, self-directed curricula) and differ on others (scheduling formats, curricular structures and emphases, and target recruitment populations). They all share, however, a driven and playful institutional ethos, founded on a mission centered on student learning, practices and structures that facilitate experimentation in service to the mission, and cultures that value learning and discovery of new and effective ways of fulfilling their missions. In other words, these institutions have been built not just as a set of innovations (as a noun) but to value innovation (as a verb) as critical to a culture of inquiry in service to student learning. They have gone beyond what Vinsel and Russell (2020) call “innovation-speak”—the jargon of technological innovation that has permeated Silicon Valley, but harbors little actual depth and understanding—and demonstrated what “actual innovation” can look like in higher education.

An important lesson from this book is that colleges and universities seeking to innovate on an institutional level should understand the importance of the culture that is needed at its base. Innovation, in our experience, has not been effective as a top-down initiative; rather, it has been most effective when it has been allowed to develop as the result of turning faculty, staff, and students loose to experiment in service to improving the learning that takes place at the institution. For schools aiming to innovate, more important than determining if the schedule should run on the block plan or not, or if the curriculum should offer traditional majors or not, they ought to provide opportunities for faculty, staff, and students to experiment and take risks—even modest ones. The best innovations are those that let staff, faculty, and students glean new insights about education from their experience tinkering with traditional approaches. The institutions that best foster innovation are those that tolerate tensions and risks intrinsic in education that let faculty and students discover the value of learning through direct experience.

This is perhaps the distinguishing feature of the colleges discussed in this volume: when institutions make their missions not statements but inquiries, and allow themselves the freedom to explore tensions embedded



in the complex and mysterious process of education, they make unexpected and important discoveries. It is this willingness not to avoid those tensions, but embrace them, that facilitates meaningful innovation. We mentioned in the introduction a variety of unavoidable tensions intrinsic to higher education: breadth versus depth, exploration versus specialization, traditional versus progressive approaches, elitism versus access, employability versus personal development, to name a few. Innovation benefits from allowing these tensions to come alive as arenas for inquiry, rather than as rhetoric to be left for marketing materials. This requires institutional courage to be willing to suspend “answers” for the sake of asking questions.

This book has provided many examples of what this process can look like practically. The example of the University of Montana Western (chapter “[Innovative Scheduling: The Intensive Delivery of Higher Education](#)”), for example, illustrates how the institutional shift to an intensive block plan schedule in 2005 has led to a variety of ways that class formats have been experimented with in service to this institutional shift, inside of a commitment to better student learning. The author recounts his own experience in adapting his classes and learning from the results. As a further example, following students’ experiences through intentionally mentorship-based programs (chapter “[The Role of Mentoring in Innovative Progressive Institutions](#)”) shows how incentivizing faculty to adopt and embrace mentorship inside of programmatic structures significantly benefits students. These approaches have been able to develop and produce effective outcomes in their institutions because those undertaking the approaches are willing to try them out, learn from them, and adapt them as part of their own professional expressions. A change to a block plan or mentorship-focused academic program cannot be successful unless the institutional culture is ready and willing to try it out and learn from it.

The need for innovation is becoming an inescapable reality for many of today’s higher educational institutions. The rapidly changing world demands that colleges and universities adapt to the situations and needs of today’s students. Whether or not institutions can embrace calls to innovate proactively and productively, rather than reactively and shallowly, requires a spirit of experimental risk-taking and commitment to reflection. The perspectives and experiences shared in the chapters of this book provide insight into what such journeys can look like, what perils they entail, and what new perspectives become available.

## LEADING A PROCESS OF CHANGE

“Yes, but how can *I* do it?”

We realize that, when we share our experiences and perspectives about institutional innovation, a common response from many readers is a pessimistic view that such approaches would not be desirable or possible at their home institutions. This speaks to one of the hardest aspects of undertaking institutional innovation: how to launch and lead it effectively.

Innovation can push an institution into uncharted waters, and the subsequent uncertainty can be triggering to constituencies across the organization. When innovation is needed, it should always be linked to the *telos* of the institution, so that its need is a clear reflection of fundamental institutional values and commitments. Even then, a typical response to a new initiative is to project shared fears onto leaders, seeking clear answers and directives. The role of leaders in this situation is not to attempt to answer everyone’s questions about what is the right or wrong thing to do, but to keep everyone focused on collectively facing the questions at the heart of the need or desire to innovate. For example, “How can we better serve today’s students whose career prospects are so in flux?” “How can we better prepare students to address complex problems with others in a globalized world?” “How do we attract new students to our programs given dwindling enrolments?”

A useful framework for leading in the context of organizational change is Ronald Heifetz’s “Adaptive Leadership” (Heifetz, 1998). Heifetz distinguishes between two kinds of challenges that organizations face: technical problems and adaptive challenges. Technical problems are those that certainly may be challenging or complex, but require a solution that is already developed and well-understood. For example, drafting a budget proposal or implementing a new learning management system may not necessarily be easy tasks, but there is a way to do them that is known and trainable. When facing technical problems in an organization, a leader’s job is to help facilitate individuals in learning and implementing the known solution.

In contrast, an adaptive challenge is a problem for which a solution is not yet known, and the sources of the problem may not even be clear. An example might be an institution facing dwindling enrollments. What are the causes, and what are the interventions? Different marketing? Budget cuts? New programs? Heifetz says that leadership through adaptive challenges is not about providing directives (as the correct interventions are

either not clear or may be interpreted not to address the full range of stakeholder concerns), and instead requires keeping everyone facing the problem, experimenting in service to finding solutions, and learning together from those experiments. The mistake many leaders make, according to Heifetz, is attempting to treat adaptive challenges as technical problems.

This is the lurid temptation that many leaders of colleges and universities face when considering questions of innovation. What technical solutions have others adopted that we can simply implement? Alas, such technical solutions may not resolve the underlying adaptive challenges. This is precisely our warning that effective innovation does not come down to piecemeal implementation of new features, but by going beyond such cosmetic “innovations” to do the difficult and reflective work of collectively experimenting in service to an institutional mission. Leading innovation is as much a problem of managing human emotions as it is of practical execution. When anxieties flare, the leader’s job is to return focus to the collective challenge and reinforce the collective commitment to the institutional mission. Being a leader of an institution undertaking innovation requires the courage to acknowledge and celebrate what is gained from a collective inquiry into an adaptive challenge.

This volume provides several examples where leaders were able to help guide institutional innovation and change through adaptive challenges. The case of New College in the University of Alabama (chapter “[Innovating as an Embedded Program at a Larger State University: New College in Three Pivotal Moments](#)”) shows how many individuals were able to keep a mission alive amidst institutional disruption, working with various stakeholders to ensure New College’s legacy persevered through a process of restructuring. El Colegio Chicano Del Pueblo (chapter “[El Colegio Chicano Del Pueblo: Decolonizing Education and the Search for Self-Determination](#)”) illustrates how individuals were able to launch a new program, built on a long-standing tradition of Chicano/a/x educational activism, by leaning into the trend of online education that spiked during the Covid-19 pandemic. The case of Bennington College’s varying approaches to faculty development (chapter “[Agility or Stability: Can a School Have Both in Faculty Hiring?](#)”) shows how leadership can be distributed to different units in the institution to adapt their approaches to fit their unique circumstances and priorities. And the case of Quest University’s closure (chapter “[When Innovative Institutions Fail: Quest University, Partnerships, Financial Sustainability](#)”) provides difficult

lessons as to why bold leadership may be needed in early moments to avoid later institutional peril. These cases illustrate the type of leadership needed for institutions in flux—leadership that must challenge communities to experiment and change, while simultaneously holding the community together by bringing attention to shared commitments. Adaptive leadership will look differently at different institutions, taking into account the various academic and financial structures, the culture of the school, and the ways in which various groups, such as students, faculty, and staff inhabit it.

### CAN INNOVATION SCALE?

One of the common features of most of the schools in this volume is that they are small. Small sizes certainly make it easier for institutions to be nimble, and for individuals in the institutions to share common understandings of and buy-in to particular innovative educational approaches. But as higher education is made up of institutions of a range of sizes, what do perspectives and lessons from small programs lend to the rest of higher education, particularly those institutions that are older and/or embedded in established traditions?

First, innovation is always a blending of the new with the old. As we have argued, effective innovation does not start with programmatic adjustments, but instead turns to questions and commitments at the heart of an institution's purpose. As those questions and commitments are explored, experimented with, re-articulated, and more deeply understood, new approaches grafted onto important traditions naturally emerge. (This is seen, for example, in how most of the colleges featured in this book have unique models, but still remain committed to the long-standing tradition of the liberal arts.) For effective innovation to take place in an institution, therefore, it becomes a matter of creating spaces where this kind of experimentation and questioning can be tolerated and encouraged.

This kind of questioning and experimentation can happen at any scale in an institution—in a classroom, between a few colleagues, in a department, in a school, or across a campus as a whole. Indeed, both New College Alabama (chapter “[Innovating as an Embedded Program at a Larger State University: New College in Three Pivotal Moments](#)”) and the Johnston Center at the University of Redlands (chapter “[After Eden: The Civic and Social Potential of Innovative Higher Education](#)”) provide examples of programs grown inside of larger institutions, and El Colegio

Chicano Del Pueblo (chapter “*El Colegio Chicano Del Pueblo: Decolonizing Education and the Search for Self-Determination*”) shows how ideas incubated at institutions elsewhere can be adapted to serve particular student populations across institutions. It is not about declaring a need for innovation as much as it is empowering individuals to take up questions with some space to try new things in response.

For innovation to take hold in institutions, faculty need to be given questions and the subsequent permission to explore answers with others beyond their academic research collaborations. In other words, faculty need to be able to find both personal and professional success in undertaking innovative ventures with colleagues, staff, and students. It is possible to do this at small scales in larger institutions if the larger institutional structure and culture can be tolerant of the non-standardization of work practices this requires. Indeed, it is our suspicion that innovation in higher education is much more common than is realized, but that innovators end up feeling like they have to swim upstream, and are siloed from one another as not to be aware of each other’s undertakings. It was this contention that partly inspired this book, in an effort to more publicly share innovative programs and connect innovators in a larger network within higher education.

There is, of course, the challenge of innovating when many structures in higher education are standardized, and require conformity to certain formats and standards, particularly through accreditation. It is quite possible, however, to innovate in service to established educational outcomes if there is flexibility given to how those outcomes might be satisfied. Indeed, chapter “*When Innovative Institutions Fail: Quest University, Partnerships, Financial Sustainability*” describes how the institutions featured in this book consider questions of assessment and accreditation, pushing themselves to clarify their own outcomes and maintain alignment with the larger standards across higher education, but still be experimental. Putting focus on the “why” rather than just the “what” can allow innovators to try new approaches while still meeting shared standards.

### A NEW ERA OF HIGHER EDUCATIONAL REFORM?

We do not claim to have all the answers about how institutions can effectively innovate. We nevertheless believe that there should be some subset of schools that intentionally pursue innovation at a deeply institutional level. The reason is that this helps make higher education more resilient as

a whole. We have seen how ideas born from the institutions featured in this book—including grading alternatives, interdisciplinary approaches, active and experiential self-driven learning programs—have made inroads into and benefitted the larger world of higher education. By serving as greenhouses for new ideas, innovative institutions develop approaches that reveal new pathways for educational growth, can be transplanted elsewhere, and enhance the overall landscape of higher education. Whereas these impacts have largely been subtle and indirect, it might now be important to contemplate the lessons from innovative institutions more explicitly, given that American higher education is potentially entering a significant period of disruption and reform that has not been seen for a long time.

The last truly significant overhaul of American higher education can trace its origins to an article entitled “The New Education,” appearing in *The Atlantic*. The author, Charles Eliot, who went on to become the president of Harvard University, made the case that American colleges were failing to prepare young people for the world they were entering. In the article, he speaks of the need to create an education that is modernized and practical, that helps prepare students for careers and civic engagement. In the years that followed, there were indeed significant reforms across higher education, resulting in features that are now standard in colleges and universities: general education requirements, research departments, majors and minors, admissions exams, and the modern system of grades. The world of higher education was remade (Davidson, 2017). This revolution, however, was made for a world that has come and gone. Eliot’s essay—signifying the launch of the most recent wave of comprehensive American higher education reform—was published in 1869 (Eliot, 1869).

There have been periods since the publication of Eliot’s article that have seen higher educational reform sprout up in pockets. This volume discusses many colleges that came about in those periods, namely the Dewey-inspired experiential and self-directed programs of the late 1920s and early 1930s (e.g., Bennington College, Black Mountain College, Marlboro College), and the student-empowered and open programs of the late 1960s and early 1970s (e.g., Hampshire College, New College Alabama, The Johnston Center at the University of Redlands, Prescott College). However, higher education as a whole has not since seen a revolution on the scale of the one that occurred from the 1860s through the

1920s, as Eliot’s Harvard helped lead the way to what we consider to be the modern American university.

While the modern model of the American university has had an extraordinary run, it may not be the model for the future. As Cathy Davidson notes in her 2017 book *The New Education* (of the same name as Charles Eliot’s 1869 essay):

Just as Eliot and others wholly remade the Puritan college, so too do we need to redesign higher education systemically and systematically, from the classroom to the board of trustees, from the fundamentals of how we teach and learn to how we measure outcomes, select, credential, and accredit in the this hyperconnected, precarious time. Students today need so-called soft skills, including strategies, methods, and tactics for successful communication and collaboration. These are necessary to navigate a world in flux, where they cannot count on continuing for any length of time in the job or even the field for which they were originally trained. (Davidson, 2017, p. 8)

Left hanging by Davidson’s charge, however, is the question of how higher educational institutions can achieve this needed reform successfully. How can they create genuinely new approaches while at the same time preserving their depth and most important traditions? How do they innovate so as to preserve the true potential of higher education that may otherwise be lost to the trendy and commercial approaches of technologization, micro-credentialing, and singularly STEM-focused training?

We may be entering a new era of reform in higher education. To brace for and embrace this era productively and in service to future students, effective innovation is key. We hope that the lessons born out of the experiences of institutions featured in this book—lessons about innovating in service to deep commitments; developing institutional cultures that empower and learn from experimentation; building and incentivizing institutional tolerance for uncertainty, ambiguity, and tensions; and celebrating the unique ways in which discoveries blossom into new institutional structures and practices, lasting beyond even those institutions themselves—help higher education step into a bright and thriving future that stewards over and enriches human progress going forward.

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