Introduction: How Innovative Institutions Enrich Higher Education

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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 Edieth 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 eliteness 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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