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."[1] 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.[2] 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."[3] 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."[4] 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."[5] Revisions to committee documents first soften "superior" to "serious," and then half-ask, half-state: "Perhaps [New College] should not be an honors college."[6] Documents outlining the mission of the

[1] 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).

[2] Ibid., p. 2.

[3] Ibid., p. 2.

[4] Ibid., p. 2.

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 Unpublished manuscript, February 28, 1975, pp. 15–17.

[6] Ibid., p. 17.

program eventually move the rhetorical needle further, declaring that New College "will not be an honors college."[7]

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.[8] 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.[9] Finally, New College was perceived as undermining an existing (but underfunded) honors program in CAS.[10] 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.[11] 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.[12] One such decision was to limit the size of New College to no more than 200 students within a university of some 13,000.[13] 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

[7] Ibid.
[8] Ibid., p. 18.
[9] Ibid., p. 19.
[10] Ibid., p. 20.
[11] Ibid., p. 19.
[12] 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).
[13] Ibid., p. 1.

students.[14] 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).[15] 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.[16] 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.'"[17] 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."[18] 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.[19]

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[20] stated, the program was interested in students who displayed a different sort of academic excellence:

[14] Ibid.
[15] Ibid.
[16] Ibid.
[17] Ibid., p. 8.
[18] Ibid., p. 1.
[19] Ibid., p. 7.
[20] 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."[21] 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

[21] 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[22], 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

[22] 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."[23]

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.[24] 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,

[23] Mathews, David. Unpublished personal letter to New College Director, Dr. Natalie Adams, September 13, 2013, p. 3.

[24] 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.[25] 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.[26] 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."[27] 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."[28] 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.[29] 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

[25] Both began their tenures at UA in 1996.

[26] 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).

[27] Unpublished memorandum from Provost Nancy Barrett. April 21, 1997 (New College archives).

[28] Ibid.

[29] 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."[30]

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.[31] 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."[32] The proposal leveraged New College's long track record of "build[ing] bridges to all the colleges"[33] 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

[30] Sorensen, Andrew. Unpublished memorandum to the Board of Trustees, February 4, 1997 (New College archives).

[31] 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.

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

[33] Ibid.

that New College is not on the cutting edge of developments in its field today."[34] 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."[35] 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.

[34] Barrett memorandum. April 21, 1997 (New College archives).

[35] 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.[36] One New College memo reported that "we have received well over 1000 letters, emails, and phone calls in opposition to this merger."[37] 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.[38]

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

[36] The New College archives house hundreds of these letters and emails (New College archives).

[37] New College faculty. Memorandum to all interested New College parties. Updated, 1997 (New College archives).

[38] 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 Sorensen.

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[39]. 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.[40] The student-designed draft of this logo is framed and housed in New College's office (Fig. 1).

[39] Blewitt, Harry. Personal communication to New College Director, Dr. Julia A. Cherry, undated, 2019.

[40] 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.[41] 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*.[42]

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.[43] 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.

[41] 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.

[42] Sloan, Bernard J. Unpublished closing remarks at the New College Commencement ceremony, May 17, 1997 (New College archives).

[43] 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,[44] and overseeing independent learning experiences for credit. While

[44] 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.[45] 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.[46] New College students continue to work closely with their New College faculty advisors to create highly

[45] 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.

[46] 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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