Research Briefs on Teaching and Learning at Independent Colleges and Universities

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RESEARCH BRIEFS ON TEACHING AND LEARNING AT INDEPENDENT COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES (2015–2016)

In 2015–2016, the staff of the Council of Independent Colleges (CIC) prepared a series of short papers on innovations in pedagogy and curriculum that may enhance student learning at independent colleges and universities. These Research Briefs were prepared as part of CIC’s Project on the Future of Independent Higher Education. Each Brief includes a review of recent literature, examples of how the innovation has been adopted by CIC members, discussion questions for further exploration, and recommendations for additional reading.

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Competency-Based Education

CIC Project on the
Future of Independent Higher Education

APRIL 2015
About the Project on the Future of Independent Higher Education

CIC’s Project on the Future of Independent Higher Education is a multi-year initiative to identify and examine the forces that are most likely to affect the future of independent colleges and universities and to help member institutions prepare for both new challenges and new opportunities. With the guidance of a steering committee of college and university presidents, the project considers potentially disruptive changes to American society and education and explores fresh approaches to higher education and new college business models. The project also examines the distinctive characteristics and missions of independent colleges that have enabled them to offer a high-quality education for so many years. The project is supported by the Lumina Foundation for Education and the TIAA-CREF Institute.

This Research Brief is part of a series of short papers on innovations in pedagogy and curriculum that may enhance student learning at independent colleges and universities. Each brief includes a review of recent literature, examples of how the innovation has been adopted by CIC members, discussion questions for further exploration, and recommendations for additional reading. The principal author is Philip M. Katz, CIC’s director of projects.

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The Council of Independent Colleges (CIC) is an association of 750 nonprofit independent colleges and universities and higher education affiliates and organizations that has worked since 1956 to support college and university leadership, advance institutional excellence, and enhance public understanding of private higher education’s contributions to society. CIC is the major national organization that focuses on providing services to leaders of independent colleges and universities as well as conferences, seminars, and other programs that help institutions improve educational quality, administrative and financial performance, and institutional visibility. CIC conducts the largest annual conference of college and university presidents. CIC also provides support to state fundraising associations that organize programs and generate contributions for private colleges and universities. The Council is headquartered at One Dupont Circle in Washington, DC. For more information, visit www.cic.edu.
Competency-Based Education

KEY POINTS:

- Competency-based education (CBE) is an approach to pedagogy that emphasizes the mastery of skills and concepts rather than credit hours or seat time. The assessment of mastery can take several forms, including formal assessments of prior learning (such as portfolio reviews or examinations) and automated evaluations of online coursework.

- Advocates of this approach argue that CBE can reduce the time and cost of earning a traditional college degree while providing students with specific workforce skills that are valued by students, funders, and employers.

- Independent colleges and universities have been more reluctant to explore CBE than public institutions or for-profit education providers. Some independent institutions, however, have successfully adopted elements of CBE for undergraduate and graduate education.

- CBE may help address two important concerns about the future of independent higher education: maintaining high standards for student learning and containing student costs. But CBE also represents a challenge to assumptions about curricula based on credit hours, sustained student-teacher interactions, and the residential experience.

Introduction

For more than a century, the course and the credit hour have been the essential building blocks of college degrees in the United States. Over the past few years, however, a combination of forces—some internal, but mostly external to higher education—have called into question the use of the credit hour as the measure of educational achievement. These forces include widespread concern about the cost of higher education; declining confidence among some employers about the readiness of college graduates for the workforce; the changing demographics of postsecondary students; increasing demands from the funders and consumers of higher education for quantifiable accountability; and the development of new technologies and platforms (such as MOOCs) that promise to teach, assess, and credential students at low cost and high volume. Based on these trends, some observers have predicted the imminent “death of the course” (Butin 2014). Others, including the federal government, accrediting agencies, private foundations, commercial enterprises, and colleges and universities in all sectors, are instead exploring innovative ways to combine traditional college-level instruction with “competency-based education.”

Competency-based education, or CBE, is “broadly defined as a form of higher education in which credit is provided on the basis of student learning rather than credit or clock hours” (Kelchen 2015, ii). CBE emphasizes the mastery of discrete concepts, knowledge, and skills, regardless of how
long it takes to achieve such mastery or where the mastery is achieved. A closely related concept is prior learning assessment (PLA), also known as credit for prior learning, which the American Council on Education defines as “academic credit granted for demonstrated college-level equivalencies gained through learning experiences outside of the college classroom, using one of the well-established methods for assessing extra-institutional learning, including third-party validation of formal training or individualized assessment, such as portfolios” (Lakin et al. 2015, 3). Two other pedagogical approaches are sometimes confused with CBE or incorrectly used as synonyms: “personalized learning” and “adaptive learning,” which rely on automated assessment and feedback systems to guide students through predefined learning pathways by identifying skills and topics that need more or less emphasis for individual learners (Helix Education 2014, 1–3).

Competency-based higher education is not a new idea. As early as the 1940s, in the wake of the G.I. Bill, the American Council on Education began to develop recommendations to award college credit for military training. In the 1970s, a few pioneering public institutions (including Empire State College in New York and Thomas Edison State College in New Jersey) created degree programs for returning adult students that relied heavily on prior learning assessments while independent Alverno College (WI) introduced an ability-based curriculum dubbed “Competence Based Learning.” In the 1990s, the multistate, public Western Governors University began offering degree programs that combined faculty mentors with self-guided study and assessment tests. But these programs remained largely marginal experiments for decades (New America Foundation 2013).

Because the precise definition of CBE remains unsettled, experts disagree on how many colleges and universities have now adopted this form of pedagogy, citing figures as low as 34 institutions with “active CBE programs that offer credit for at least some types of PLA” and as high as “500+ institutions [that have either developed a CBE offering or have indicated their intent to do so” (Kelchen 2015, ii; Ebersole 2015). Enthusiasm for CBE also varies by sector, with the leaders of independent colleges and universities more cautious to adopt CBE than their counterparts at public and for-profit institutions. According to a 2014 survey conducted by Gallup and Inside Higher Ed, 35 percent of chief academic officers from independent baccalaureate institutions “oppose the awarding of academic credit based on demonstrated competence,” and just 25 percent of their colleges “award academic credit based on demonstrated competence.” The comparable figures for all public institutions: 12 percent of CAOs are opposed and 55 percent of institutions offer credit (Jaschik and Lederman 2015, 14–15).

Recent Developments and Criticisms

The strongest proponents of CBE since 2013 have included prominent foundations, enterprises with a stake in assessment and instructional resources, and the federal government. That year, Jamie Merisotis, president of the Lumina Foundation for Education, stated that CBE was “a big deal”:

[T]he attention to competencies is not an alternative or exception to the mainstream model. It is, instead, a long-overdue shift of emphasis from what is taught to what is learned (Merisotis 2013).

Lumina began to fund two national initiatives to promote CBE: the Competency-Based Education Network (CBEN), which expanded to 45 members in early 2015, and the Jump Start Program of the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning. Starting in 2013, the Gates Foundation has collaborated with EDUCAUSE, the education technology association, to support CBE projects at Southern New Hampshire University (SNHU) and other colleges through generous Next Generation Learning Challenges grants (Parry et al. 2013). In 2014,
Pearson, the education publishing and services giant, introduced “a framework and assessment for Competency-Based Education” to help postsecondary institutions “assess their readiness to implement this new model” (Pearson Education 2014). This was seen as a logical extension of its core business activities in textbooks and testing, as nearly every variety of CBE relies on customizable content and assessment tools. Other organizations investing in for-profit CBE initiatives include Capella University, Flat World, Lumen Learning, and various MOOC providers (Watters 2014).

Also in 2013, the U.S. Department of Education issued its first guidelines for CBE programs as part of the Obama administration’s college completion agenda. In January 2015, partly at the urging of the Gates Foundation, the Department granted waivers to about 40 colleges and universities that will allow them to experiment with new CBE and PLA programs without threatening the financial aid eligibility of the institutions or their students (Fain 2015). In March 2015, SNHU president Paul LeBlanc was appointed a special advisor to the Department on CBE-related issues.

This wave of activity has highlighted but failed to resolve basic questions about the efficacy of competency-based education. For example, does it improve student learning or produce outcomes that are comparable to other forms of higher education? The research on student learning outcomes that compares CBE to more traditional modes of instruction remains inconclusive, though it does suggest that prior learning assessment can be an effective approach for many adult and returning students (Klein-Collins 2012, 32–33; Lakin et al., 2015, 5–6, 20; Feldstein 2014). Skeptics argue that “CBE, for all its emphasis on ‘mastery as non-negotiable,’ has no theory of learning” and that pedagogic approaches originally developed to teach and assess discrete skills may be inadequate to develop the higher-order skills that traditionally define a liberal arts education (Butin 2014; Feldstein 2014). This, too, remains unproven.

Does CBE help prepare students more effectively for careers? For most proponents, an essential advantage of CBE is that competencies can be “aligned to employability” by focusing on specific workplace skills, perhaps in consultation with employers (Feldstein 2015; Weise 2014). This is noteworthy, in a moment of heightened public concern about the value of higher education in preparing students for the workforce. Yet the vocational focus and origins of CBE may represent a barrier to adoption by liberal arts institutions, with more than half of the independent college CAOs who responded to the recent Gallup/Inside Higher Ed survey agreeing that “Competency-based education may be damaging to general education.”

Is CBE more cost effective than traditional forms of instruction and thus more affordable for students? Here, too, the evidence is incomplete. The most comprehensive review of the landscape of competency-based education, prepared for the American Enterprise Institute by researcher Robert Kelchen, concludes that while “it is typically assumed that CBE is less expensive than traditional education models because it uses less time and fewer instructor resources … this has yet to be rigorously examined” (Kelchen 2015, 17). For students, the cost of earning credits through prior assessments (whether standardized tests or portfolio reviews) can be cheaper than per-credit tuition, but pricing models and institutional subsidies vary widely. Finally, under current law, students cannot use federal financial aid to pay for most portfolio assessments or self-paced courses and programs that employ CBE.

Examples of CBE at Independent Colleges and Universities

A number of CIC member institutions have adapted elements of CBE that are consistent with their distinctive needs and missions. There are at least three models in the sector: CBE programs that are integrated with the undergraduate curriculum; CBE programs that are run as distinctive units, with little...
or no interaction with campus-based programs; and CBE programs that are targeted at specific student populations, such as returning adult students or students pursuing professional credentials.

**Alverno College**, a small, Catholic women’s college in Milwaukee, integrates specific competencies into an undergraduate liberal arts curriculum that includes core courses and conventional majors and minors. Alverno has a long record of serving adult students, but today the majority of students are traditional aged undergraduates who live on campus for at least two semesters. Alverno was among the earliest adopters of CBE in the United States, introducing a pilot “Competency Based Learning” program in 1973 after four years of discussion spurred by institutional and societal crises in the 1960s. The goal was to replace credit hours with eight competencies collectively defined as “a working set of outcomes of liberal learning” (Alverno College 1974; Klein-Collins 2012, 16–18). A modified version of this approach, now called the “Ability-Based Curriculum,” remains in place. Alverno students are still expected to master eight core competencies: Communication, Analysis, Problem Solving, Valuing, Social Interaction, Developing a Global Perspective, Effective Citizenship, and Aesthetic Engagement. Instruction includes a mix of traditional credit-bearing courses, required internships, and projects. Ongoing assessment and feedback are provided by faculty members, peers, and professionals from the internship sites, supplemented by guided, online self-assessments. Narrative transcripts and a digital portfolio system have replaced traditional letter grades.

At its core, **Southern New Hampshire University** is a residential liberal arts college, despite multiple satellite campuses and extensive graduate and continuing-education programs across the state. At the same time, SNHU is a leading innovator in CBE: It was the first university approved by the federal government in 2013 for “direct assessment of student learning” (meaning that students can apply their federal financial aid to competency-based associate’s degree programs offered by the institution); it has received substantial grants from the Lumina and Gates Foundations; and it has been ranked among the best online colleges and most innovative organizations in the country. SNHU’s signature CBE program, labeled “College for America,” offers students an annual subscription rate of $2,500 for as many credits as they can complete at their own pace during the year; at least one student has completed an associate’s degree in three months (Kelchen 2015, 13–15; College for America n.d.; Weise 2015).

The two sides of SNHU are operated as separate units and rarely meet. According to SNHU’s president, Paul LeBlanc, that was an intentional decision—and an acknowledgment of the distinctive culture and mission of the residential undergraduate college:

> [W]hen we created College for America ... it really stood almost outside of traditional campus-based governance. Each unit now has a governance structure designed specifically for its particular needs and culture. ... [E]ach business/academic unit is quite separate from each other because the jobs to be done that each are asked to do are quite different, thus the student markets that they serve are very different. Thus they need to have their very specific structures, culture, governance, and way of being in the world, if you will (Weise 2015).

At the same time, surplus revenues from the online and CBE programs are being used to subsidize and enhance the residential campus, one of many examples of innovation supporting tradition at independent colleges and universities (Weise 2015; Hechinger 2013).

*Except where noted elsewhere, the descriptions of academic programs in this section are based on information from the institutions’ public websites.
Several independent institutions have adopted programs for prior learning assessment but have not integrated CBE into other aspects of the undergraduate curriculum. The Experiential Learning Assessment (ELA) at Bellevue University (NE) begins with a free, self-paced online course called “Discover Your Value: Turning Experience into College Credit,” which is offered in a MOOC format (Canvas Network 2015). The course is designed to help students explore their readiness for further education and assemble an assessment portfolio of prior work and informal learning experiences. Until recently, Bellevue offered a similar course in a face-to-face format, but moving to a MOOC platform has allowed hundreds of students to take the course at the same time and increased by 50 percent the number of portfolios submitted (Lakin et al. 2015, 19). Students can then have their portfolios reviewed for $150 and receive credit for both the online course and their previous work, but no more than 30 degree credits can be earned through PLA.

The Prior Learning Assessment Program at Marylhurst University (OR) relies on two workshops, a sequence of online tutorials, and guided instruction instead of a MOOC, and returning adult students can submit portfolios and essays for assessment, earning as many as 45 undergraduate credits in the process. In a third model, Wisconsin Lutheran College has partnered with the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) on a PLA program called “Learning Counts” as part of a new accelerated degree completion program (“Making a Career Change,” 2014). Students enroll in an online course—ADU 200, “Assessment of Prior Learning: Theory & Practice”—developed and administered by CAEL, then prepare portfolios with the advice of CAEL staff and the college faculty. CAEL trains the assessors. The fees for the online portfolio development course and the review process are set by CAEL. According to Daniel Johnson, president of Wisconsin Lutheran College, the most significant challenge in implementing this program at a small institution that previously focused on traditional undergraduates was convincing the faculty that PLA is “grounded in research and best practice” and measures “authentic learning ... not just experiences” (Johnson 2015).

Other CIC institutions offer competency-based degrees but only for graduate or professional studies. These include a master of science in educational design and technology at Concordia University (WI), a master of arts in teaching at Southwestern College (KS), and the master of strategic communication, MBA, and RN to BS programs at Westminster College (UT) (see program descriptions at the C-BEN website). Each program includes a combination of project-based and self-paced online components, and at least one institution, Concordia, awards digital badges for specific competencies as well as degrees (Concordia University Online n.d.).

Finally, it should be noted that CBE is no different in kind from many other forms of prior learning assessment that have long been standard practice at independent colleges and universities, including the awarding of credit for AP or IB coursework in high school, credit for CLEP (College-Level Examination Program) exams, or even placement tests for incoming students. In addition, many CIC members have demonstrated a commitment to innovative competency frameworks while evaluating and implementing the Degree Qualifications Profile, which defines a set of high-level intellectual skills and competencies that might be expected from a degree recipient (Grimes 2014; Merisotis 2013).
QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER:

• Which, if any, elements of CBE are appropriate to the mission and values of the institution?

• Is CBE appropriate for some but not all students served by the institution? For example, an institution may want to offer opportunities for prior learning assessment to transfer students who need to satisfy requirements usually fulfilled during the underclass years but not to incoming first-year students. Or it may want to incorporate CBE into graduate and professional programs but not undergraduate programs in the liberal arts.

• How should institutions calculate the costs of providing CBE, including both fixed costs (such as investments in technology) and the marginal costs of enrolling additional students (Kelchen 2015, 17)? Can CBE help stretch financial resources, reducing instructional costs that can be passed to students as tuition savings?

• How can CBE be combined with the student-centered, residential college experience that defines so many smaller independent colleges?

• Many aspects of the existing business models and operational procedures at independent colleges and universities—from faculty compensation to curriculum design to enrollment management and financial aid—are based on the assumption of credit-based courses of a given duration. What business models and procedures might have to be altered to accommodate CBE?

• Will independent colleges and universities be compelled to offer competency-based credentials in a world where other types of education providers offer competency-based credentials (such as “badges” for MOOCs or online tutorials) that are considered of value by employers?

• What counts as a “competency” and how do institutions measure it? As education technology expert Audrey Watters notes, shifting the focus from credits to competencies “does not really resolve the question of what it is we expect college students to learn or what’s the best way for them to demonstrate this” (Watters 2014).
References


Suggestions for Further Reading

Robert Kelchen, “The Landscape of Competency-Based Education: Enrollments, Demographics, and Affordability,” AEI Series on Competency-Based Higher Education (Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute, 2015). This includes a review of the different business models used by CBE programs and a preliminary analysis of cost-effectiveness.


Deborah Seymour, Deborah Everhart, and Karen Yoshino, The Currency of Higher Education: Credits and Competencies (Washington, DC: American Council on Education and Blackboard, 2015). This report asks whether “we need a new currency for measuring post-secondary outcomes and achievement” and whether competency-based measures can be aligned with traditional course credit measures.

Competency-Based Education Network (C-BEN), www.cbenetwork.org. An expanding network of individual institutions (including five CIC members) plus four public university systems designed to “address shared challenges to designing, developing and scaling competency-based degree programs.” The website includes an extensive library of resources.
Interdisciplinary Undergraduate Education

CIC Project on the Future of Independent Higher Education

MAY 2015
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Other Reports in This Series

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Research Brief 1: Competency-Based Education (April 2015)

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Interdisciplinary Undergraduate Education

KEY POINTS:

• During the most recent decade, interdisciplinary instruction at the undergraduate level has increased rapidly.

• Independent colleges and universities are both innovators in developing new approaches to interdisciplinary education and strong supporters of traditional liberal arts disciplines. Some observers argue that interdisciplinary approaches are better suited to the complexity of the 21st-century world and workplace.

• Significant barriers to interdisciplinarity include institutional inertia, evaluation challenges, the strong commitment of faculty members to the disciplines in which they were trained, and the role of discipline-based departments in curricula and faculty rewards.

• The size, flexibility, and commitment to teaching at smaller independent institutions can make it easier for them to introduce innovative programs in interdisciplinary education.

• Campus leaders can promote and sustain interdisciplinary initiatives by developing and supporting policies that explicitly reward faculty members and departments for interdisciplinary teaching.

Introduction

Interdisciplinary innovations and traditional academic disciplines both thrive at America’s independent colleges and universities and cannot be considered completely apart from each other. Indeed, “a serious concern for interdisciplinarity is about as old as the disciplines themselves” (Abbott 2002, 213). This concern has been reflected in waves of curricular experimentation since the 19th century, generally cresting higher in each generation, so that interdisciplinary programs at the undergraduate level that might have been rare or “adventurous” in the 1950s or even the 1970s “are as common on campuses [today] as fake IDs”—in the lively phrase of Wesleyan University president Michael Roth (Roth 2010). Moreover, each generation has introduced a new vocabulary to describe interdisciplinary curricula, from various “studies” (women’s, African American, ethnic) in the 1960s to “integrative studies” in the 1970s and 1980s to “design thinking” in the 21st century (Miller 2015).

Interdisciplinary courses and degree programs are especially common at independent colleges and universities. By the mid-1990s, students at private liberal arts colleges were already more likely to take interdisciplinary courses than their peers at other kinds of institutions, while the faculty members at such institutions were more likely to teach (or team-teach) interdisciplinary courses (Hill 2013, 87). In 2006, a working group convened by the Teagle Foundation and the Social Science Research Council (SSRC) surveyed the institutions then classified as “Baccalaureate College—Liberal Arts” to review the
current state of interdisciplinary education at smaller, mostly private colleges and universities that focus on teaching undergraduates. They found that 60 percent of the institutions in the survey group required at least one interdisciplinary course from their students and 94 percent offered at least one interdisciplinary major. The most common interdisciplinary majors were environmental studies, women’s and gender studies, neuroscience/psychobiology, American studies, and biochemistry/molecular biology, followed by several area-studies majors (Rhoten et al. 2006, 6–7).

That year, about one-fifth of liberal arts students at the surveyed institutions graduated with an interdisciplinary major of some kind. In the period that followed, from 2006 to 2012, the number of bachelor’s degrees awarded in “multi- or interdisciplinary studies” by all U.S. colleges and universities rose by an impressive 49 percent (Snyder and Dillow 2013, Table 322.10), with independent colleges and universities still in the lead. Despite this increase, most interdisciplinary degree programs on campuses remain quite small. “In terms of enrollments,” argues Jerry Jones in his recent book, In Defense of Disciplines, “interdisciplinarity does not represent the principal competitive challenge to the traditional liberal arts disciplines, but instead it is applied fields, including business, criminal justice, and communications, that have seen considerable expansion in the number of majors” (Jones 2014, 8). Of course, many applied fields, at the undergraduate and graduate levels, are also broadly interdisciplinary.

The growth of interdisciplinary undergraduate programs has not yielded a common, widely-accepted definition of “interdisciplinarity” (Repko 2012, 11–15). Competing definitions tend to fall into two categories: either comprehensive definitions that “broadly define ... [interdisciplinarity as any] interaction of two or more different disciplines”; or distinctive definitions that emphasize some particular way of bringing together academic disciplines to “produce a cognitive advancement—e.g., explaining a phenomenon, solving a problem, creating a product, raising a new question—in ways that would have been unlikely through single disciplinary means” (Rhoten et al. 2006, 2–3). “Interdisciplinary” also is used, sometimes interchangeably, to describe research processes, organizational structures, areas of inquiry, new kinds of knowledge or emerging academic fields, and pedagogic approaches that focus on synthesis and integration (Repko 2012, 22–25; Newell 2007). The Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) Liberal Education and America’s Promise (LEAP) initiative incorporates the related concept of “integrative learning,” defined as “synthesis and advanced accomplishment across general and specialized skills” and demonstrated by applying “knowledge, skills, and responsibilities to new settings and complex problems” (Flaherty 2015).

Interdisciplinary pedagogy at the undergraduate level usually involves one or more of the following approaches: 1. **Thematic**, in which the methods and insights of more than one discipline are applied separately to a common theme. 2. **Problem-based**, where the focus is on specific real-world problems (such as water pollution or international conflict resolution) or intellectual questions (such as the nature of leadership) that cannot be addressed adequately by one discipline alone. 3. **Comparative**, in which the insights of one discipline are used to critique and sharpen the insights of other disciplines. 4. **Synthetic or integrative**, with a focus on skills, perspectives, and modes of thinking that are not unique to any single discipline. Diana Rhoten and her colleagues argue that “any ‘successful’ interdisciplinary program—in addition to focusing on critical thinking, problem solving, and analytic skills expected of most liberal arts programs—must develop student capacities to integrate or synthesize disciplinary knowledge and modes of thinking” (Rhoten et al. 2006, 3).

Interdisciplinary education may or may not involve team teaching, but the primary rationale for team teaching is straightforward: “it is the simplest way to ensure that different disciplinary perspectives are accurately and convincingly presented to the
students” (Newell 1983, 11). Effective team teaching has a strong positive impact on both student learning and faculty development, as students and instructors alike must explore multiple perspectives and make new connections (Plank 2013). Team teaching, however, is not necessarily an efficient use of instructional resources. Research shows that successful team teaching typically takes more time than solo teaching, especially during the development of new courses (Plank 2013, 3). Preparing for interdisciplinary team teaching may require additional faculty training and resources, for which external funding is infrequently available (Kezar and Elrod 2012). Finally, team teaching often requires adjustments to faculty workloads and compensation. At some institutions, both instructors receive full teaching credit for a team-taught course, which doubles the faculty costs to offer an interdisciplinary course (Plank 2013, 1; also see Newell 1983, 11–12). At other institutions, instructors may receive credit for a fraction of a team-taught course, or a course may be doubled in size to ensure that each instructor is teaching the equivalent of a normal load, or a course may be divided into smaller discussion sections with relatively little classroom time shared by the team of instructors, or an institution will encourage faculty members to team-teach courses as an overload. Policies for assigning departmental or divisional credit for interdisciplinary courses taught by faculty teams also vary, and can be a point of contention between departments competing for scarce institutional resources.

The most common and compelling argument for interdisciplinarity in all its forms is that the world is becoming more complex and interconnected and that “coping with this complexity will require a new way of understanding—one that does not rely on having only a single viewpoint” (Newell 2007). As Larry Shinn, former president of Berea College (KY), has noted, we live in an “age of the unthinkable,” marked by “unexpected and rapid change.” In response, we must educate ourselves and our students for consequential decision-making in a world of complex problems (such as climate change, poverty, and interreligious conflicts) and rapid change (such as the collapse of world financial markets in 2008–09 or the rapid and revolutionary rise of information and communication technologies) [Shinn 2012, 16].

Some of the stimulus for interdisciplinary programs, therefore, comes from employers who want workers who can integrate knowledge and skills from multiple fields to help navigate the unpredictable global economy. For example, Sienna College (NY) recently introduced new interdisciplinary programs that “bring a broader perspective to liberal arts, business, and science education” as an explicit response to the “national conversation that questions the employability of liberal arts majors” (Rogers 2014). Some of the stimulus for interdisciplinary teaching comes from faculty members whose research interests have pushed them to the boundaries of their disciplines. Some comes from academic leaders, who may be interested in both the potential for student learning and the marketing and funding appeal of interdisciplinary programs. Demand from current undergraduates seems to be a less significant factor (Jacobs 2014, 199).

**Interdisciplinary Innovations and Disciplines Thrive at Independent Institutions**

According to Shinn, independent colleges and universities are especially well suited to develop interdisciplinary curricula because of their tradition of “innovative and integrated student learning and flexible and interdisciplinary institutional structures” (Shinn 2012, 16). In a recent essay chiefly concerned with the future of independent higher education, Wendy Hill, provost of Lafayette College (PA), considered why “fostering interdisciplinarity [is] the
right approach for liberal arts colleges." She offered four answers (Hill 2013, 88–89):

1. Interdisciplinarity is “consistent with our history and mission” as teaching-focused institutions.

2. It “adjusts students and faculty from an emphasis—some have suggested an over-emphasis—on a specific major or disciplinary perspective.”

3. “Interdisciplinary teaching promotes greater student engagement in learning, enhances the development of higher cognitive skills, fosters more creative thinking, increases sensitivity to ethical issues, and leads to greater tolerance for ambiguity…. [It] creates innovative and holistic knowledge.” (This answer neatly summarizes the best current research on student engagement and learning outcomes, which Hill cites.)

4. “Interdisciplinarity is the bridge between the academy and the real world.” As tuition-dependent institutions, smaller private colleges are especially responsive to the “real world” demands for new student skills and perspectives that Shinn described above.

Another advantage that smaller private colleges and universities have in developing interdisciplinary curricula is their size. Although they may have access to relatively fewer resources, the faculty members at these institutions also are less likely to be burdened by the kinds of bureaucracy that faculty at research universities “point to … as a major impediment to redefining their scholarly interests” (Hill 2013, 87). But as David Oxtoby, president of Pomona College, observes, “the smaller scale and the ease for faculty members to make connections across the entire institution” does not necessarily make it easier to start and sustain interdisciplinary experiments. Instead, “the smaller scale of our colleges actually can reduce flexibility.” This is a matter of both limited personnel and “the local politics of fighting for and retaining faculty positions, which can be threatened if new faculty members are brought in who cross boundaries and can contribute to core teaching in more than one area” (Oxtoby 2013, 78). Many researchers and academic leaders stress the role of academic leaders in developing policies that explicitly reward faculty members and departments for interdisciplinary teaching.

One popular argument for the superiority of interdisciplinary studies over traditional academic disciplines is summed up in a quip from political scientist Garry Brewer: “The world has problems, but universities have departments”—and departments foster narrow, single-discipline perspectives (quoted in Hyun 2011, 6). A number of prominent scholars from research universities, including Louis Menand (Harvard University), Cathy Davidson (City University of New York), and Mark Taylor (Columbia University), have pushed the argument further in recent years, suggesting that academic departments and the traditional disciplines they represent are outmoded impediments to both research and the curriculum because of their narrowness (Wellmon 2015). “Abolish permanent departments, even for undergraduate education, and create problem-focused programs,” Taylor argues, because the future requires “a curriculum structured like a web or complex adaptive network” (Taylor 2009).

Few independent colleges and universities have adopted Taylor’s advice. Instead, they appreciate that “interdisciplinarity is fully complementary to the disciplines, embracing them as it draws insights from them” (Newell 2007). Independent institutions that are highly committed to rigorous instruction in traditional arts and sciences also are frequently the most committed to cross-disciplinary education. For example, in a recent essay about STEM education and the liberal arts, Loretta Jackson-Hayes, who teaches chemistry at Rhodes College (TN), emphasizes the combination of hands-on research with the writing skills and broad perspectives her students derive from other disciplines. The result is that “employers in every sector continue to scoop up my students because of their ability to apply cross-
disciplinary thinking to an incredibly complex world” (Jackson-Hayes 2015). The challenge, says Wesleyan’s Roth, is to “rethink what it means to offer a coherent program in a discipline or a department while we explore the possibilities of … interdisciplinary programs” (Roth 2010).

Original research keeps traditional academic disciplines vibrant at smaller colleges and universities just as it does at large research universities. The fact that undergraduate students at smaller private colleges are more likely to collaborate with faculty members on original research than their peers at other kinds of institutions (CIC 2011, 22) suggests that they receive a more intense experience with both disciplinary norms and innovative research across disciplines. In turn, the faculty members at independent institutions who collaborate with student researchers “find skills based in the disciplines to be an essential part of the work they do, even when this work leads them far from their departmental homes” into interdisciplinary teaching (Roth 2010; also see Hill 2013, 87). Perhaps the best evidence that traditional disciplines matter and thrive at independent institutions is that “on a per capita basis there are more [private] liberal arts college graduates obtaining advanced degrees and doctorates than any other institution type … [because] these colleges better prepare students for the levels of thinking required for completing advanced degrees of study” (Jones 2015; also see Rine 2014).

Some Barriers to Interdisciplinarity

Hill argues that smaller private colleges and universities typically possess the “essential collaborative spirit required for interdisciplinarity,” but there are still significant barriers to introducing and maintaining interdisciplinary programs (Hill 2013, 92). Faculty size and the internal competition for increasingly scarce faculty resources already have been mentioned. Institutional inertia, a barrier to innovation in general, is an impediment to interdisciplinarity as well (Abbott 2002). The Teagle-SSRC Working Group emphasized the limitations of standard assessment tools, most of which were developed with traditional disciplines in mind, for the evaluation of interdisciplinary work; as a result, just 30 percent of the colleges in the 2006 survey reported success at assessing explicitly interdisciplinary student learning outcomes (Rhoten, et al. 2006, 12–13). New evaluation frameworks developed in the past decade, such as the National Survey of Student Engagement and the Lumina Foundation’s Degree Qualifications Profile, have met just part of the need for better assessment (Kezar and Elrod 2012; Adler-Kassner 2014, 445–447).

Several observers also have noted the institutional temptations to push interdisciplinary courses to one end or the other of the general education curriculum. Thus, “while faculty and academic administrators recognize the value of interdisciplinary teaching and coursework, interdisciplinary courses often become confined to first-year seminar programs or core requirements created because we know they are good for our students.” Moreover, because “the lifeblood of a department is its majors … there is an incentive for every department to create a strong, stand-alone introductory course that will attract entering students and get them to commit to further study,” often at the expense of interdisciplinary courses for first- or second-year students (Oxtoby 2012, 79). Finally, if the distribution requirements for general education “can be satisfied by narrowly focused disciplinary courses[,] … the senior capstone course essentially bears the full weight of integrating a student’s four-year exploration” (Shinn 2012, 20; also see Adler-Kassner 2014).

The most significant barrier to interdisciplinary innovation is often the faculty: how they are trained and socialized in their academic disciplines, how they are hired, and how they are rewarded for disciplinary research and teaching. As Karri Holley argues in her monograph on Understanding Interdisciplinary Challenges and Opportunities in Higher Education, there is an “inherent conflict between the professoriate and the university structure related to interdisciplinarity.” She concisely summarizes the terms of the conflict:
Traditional faculty responsibilities have historically been organized by disciplinary knowledge domains. Through organizational socialization, beginning during graduate education (if not before) and continuing into the faculty career, professors experience academic life within disciplinary boundaries. The discipline provides the academic’s primary cognitive, social, and cultural tools through which to organize and extend knowledge. Faculty reward and recognition structures are framed in disciplinary terms. These structures influence faculty behavior in terms of writing, conference presentations, and other research activities. Departmental and tenure policies, for example, measure an academic’s productivity by the degree to which the work produced furthers the understanding of the disciplinary community (Holley 2009, 75–76; also see Abbott 2002; Taylor 2009; Hyun 2011, 7).

Countering these divisive forces may require “dramatic ... [changes to] how faculty are organized and rewarded and how curricula are organized and presented” (Shinn 2012, 21). In terms of institutional policies, Hill recommends “actively recruiting faculty ... with collaborative and interdisciplinary interests”; specifying the importance of interdisciplinary research and teaching in promotion, tenure, and merit pay policies; and addressing faculty “concern about the impact on a department of teaching courses ‘outside’ the department.” Her own institution addresses the final concern through memoranda of understanding that are explicit about the “timeline and responsibilities” for teaching outside a department (Hill 2013, 89–91).

Additional recommendations come from investigators involved in Project Kaleidoscope (PKAL), an initiative to promote interdisciplinary teaching and learning in STEM fields. From 2007 to 2010, a consortium of 28 colleges and universities (nearly half of them CIC members) participated in a project facilitated by PKAL, “Facilitating Interdisciplinary Learning.” The premise of the project was “that higher education institutions will not create the innovative and complex thinkers of the future unless campuses reshape their processes and policies.” The project yielded five practical strategies for overcoming faculty resistance and other barriers to interdisciplinary innovations:

1. “Start by articulating a common understanding of interdisciplinary learning goals that will drive the cycle of curricular innovation, development, assessment, and improvement.”
2. “Use assessment to connect those goals with program structure, content, and pedagogy, paying attention to students as individual learners....”
3. “From within and with new hires, build a critical of mass of faculty and staff who assume leadership responsibility ... [for] shaping interdisciplinary curricular and co-curricular approaches....”
4. “Incorporate interdisciplinary program needs into the processes of campus governance and the distribution of resources: money, personnel, equipment, and spaces.”
5. “Align interdisciplinary learning with the institutional vision, mission, and identity, and include it in strategic planning at all levels” (Kezar and Elrod 2012, 17).

These lessons are not, of course, limited to STEM.

Examples of Interdisciplinarity at Independent Colleges and Universities*

Interdisciplinary teaching at independent institutions takes many forms, including undergraduate majors and minors, general education programs structured around interdisciplinary themes, faculty-student

*Except where noted elsewhere, the descriptions of academic programs in this section are based on information from the institutions’ public websites.
research teams devoted to real-world interdisciplinary problems, and dedicated institutes or centers. **North Central College** (IL), for example, promotes a “commitment to the philosophy of interdisciplinary studies that began in the 1970s.” All undergraduates take at least one interdisciplinary course, and many of them select popular interdisciplinary majors such as integrative media studies, which “pulls courses from computer science, art, English, journalism, and broadcast communications” ("Academics without Borders" 2014). **Lafayette College** (PA) offers 14 interdisciplinary majors and ten interdisciplinary minors in such fields as Africana studies, environmental science, and computational methods, and nearly 10 percent of students choose one of these majors. Since the 2008–2009 economic downturn, the number of interdisciplinary courses has risen steadily as part of an institutional commitment to interdisciplinary teaching and faculty collaboration (Daniels 2012). In 2010, **Allegheny College** (PA) introduced a new strategic plan that committed the college to “build on the strength of its disciplinary majors to create new interdisciplinary programs reflective of the need in today’s society to connect, synthesize, and transfer knowledge”; it now has 16 interdisciplinary programs. Each of the institutions mentioned here has fewer than 2,800 undergraduate students.

Many institutions also allow undergraduates to develop their own interdisciplinary majors. For example, students in the Individually Designed Interdisciplinary Program at **Emerson College** (MA) pursue majors with "an anchoring concept or theme" under the guidance of an advisory team of two faculty members from different disciplines. Recent majors include “Global Activism and Advocacy” and “Effective Marketing through Digital Media Design.” The program is coordinated by the college’s Institute for Liberal Arts and Interdisciplinary Studies, which also promotes interdisciplinary faculty research, hosts co-curricular activities, and “facilitate[s] cross-fertilization between liberal studies and Emerson’s professional programs” (Emerson College 2014, 11).

**Wheaton College** (MA), with an undergraduate enrollment of about 1,600, offers examples of two more approaches to bridging the individual disciplines. In 2001, the college pioneered a general education “Connections Curriculum” that requires students to complete several sets of coordinated courses that are related by a common theme but taught separately (see LeBlanc, Armstrong, and Gousie 2010). The students can chose from such themes as “Body, Form and Motion” (pairing human anatomy and figure drawing classes), “Genes in Context” (pairing bioinformatics and philosophy courses), or “Madness in Medicine and Society” (combining courses in English, anthropology, and psychology). In 2013, the college inaugurated the Wheaton Institute for the Interdisciplinary Humanities, where a pair of faculty directors and a cohort of student fellows collaborate on a common theme that is explored through year-long courses; co-curricular activities such as conferences, performances, panels, and guest lectures; and “real world activities.” The theme for 2014–2015 was “Goya and Beethoven: Finding a Voice Out of Silence” and the applied activity was organizing, curating, and promoting a museum exhibit. According to one student, it was “quite a ride, but experiential, interdisciplinary learning ... has proven itself to be far more poignant than simple classroom learning.” The instructors also reported being “recharged and reinvigorated” by the team teaching (Manning 2015, 18, 24).

The McMaster School for Advancing Humanity at **Defiance College** (OH) is a concrete expression of the institution’s faith-based mission, which emphasizes the “spirit of global service” and “opportunities for students to initiate and facilitate beneficial action.” The McMaster School, founded in 2002, does not offer formal courses but instead facilitates projects designed to address complex real-world problems in specific locations, such as the impact of logging on agricultural communities in Belize or the training needs of teachers in Cambodia. Each year faculty members propose projects that can be undertaken by research teams of one to three faculty members.
members and six to 12 students majoring in various disciplines. The research teams work as interdisciplinary learning communities, with the students developing individual research projects that support the common project. The year-long experience includes an on-site field experience of several weeks preceded and followed by two-hour weekly meetings to prepare for the field and then “reflect and analyze after the trip.” The result, according to Mary Ann Studer, dean of the McMaster School, is “deep learning,” “a more complex understanding of the world,” tangible benefits for the partner communities abroad, and a stronger commitment to interdisciplinarity across the campus (Studer 2009).

**Dominican University of California** offers an example of how an interdisciplinary research framework (“Big History”) can be used to reshape a general education program. The idea of Big History was introduced by David Christian at Australia’s Macquarie University in 1989. The scope of the framework is immense, embracing 13.7 billion years of natural and human history from the Big Bang through the near future and drawing upon the disciplinary insights of historians, astronomers, physicists, geologists, biologists, and others. Since being introduced, Big History has generated academic and popular books, university chairs, television series, a popular TED talk, and a K-12 curriculum endorsed by Bill Gates, but relatively few courses at the undergraduate level prior to 2010 (Brown 2010; Pitchford and Behman 2014). According to Cynthia Stokes Brown, the pioneer in teaching the subject at Dominican, instructors at most other colleges and universities were intimidated by its scope and the fact that Big History did “not fit into the departmental structure” or the typical faculty rewards structure (Brown 2010, 9).

This did not deter Brown and her colleagues, who believed that Big History is “inherently transdisciplinary,” asks big questions and demands big answers, encourages synthesis, and offers a powerful scaffold for contextualizing subsequent learning—all necessary elements for an effective first-year experience (Behmand and Castner 2012). They also believed that smaller private institutions like Dominican have the “size and flexibility to bring an innovative—even transformative—program to campus” (Pitchford and Behman 2014, 11). Thus, in 2010 the university introduced a year-long sequence of Big History courses, including a seminar in the first semester that participating faculty teach from a common syllabus and a choice of complementary discipline-based courses in the second semester.

Several factors have contributed to the overall success of this initiative, which may serve as a model for introducing interdisciplinary innovations at other institutions:

1. “Significant time and funding” for faculty development, a necessity since every participating instructor is teaching outside of his or her own discipline at some point. The week-long summer institutes developed for Dominican University faculty members have been so successful that they are now open to outside instructors who want to introduce Big History at their own institutions.

2. Intentional efforts to align the program objectives, student learning outcomes, and institutional mission under the leadership of the chief academic officer.

3. “Engagement with faculty leadership … [to] address issues of displacement and territory.”

4. Faculty incentives, including “reassigned time, campus-wide acknowledgement, travel funds, [and] aligned tenure and promotion policies.”

5. “Ongoing meaningful assessment with continuous quality improvement” (Pitchford and Behman 2014, 17).

The assessments demonstrate that the Big History curriculum is meeting many of the intended student learning outcomes. According to the project directors, “students [have learned] to ask questions about the larger implications of their studies, and absorb and analyze new information more critically.
and introspectively” (Behmand and Castner 2012). Focus groups with students, however, indicate that some of them “have difficulty seeing the relevance of the factual content” and struggle to connect Big History with the disciplinary content of their eventual major (Cabrera et al. 2014).

The “College of Transdisciplinarity” at Woodbury University (CA) is an example of how interdisciplinary perspectives can become institutionalized at independent colleges and universities. In 2005–2006, the small College of Arts and Sciences at Woodbury—then and now an institution with a strong emphasis on professional and undergraduate programs in architecture, design, and business—faced the prospect of being demoted to a service department for general education courses. Instead, after an intensive strategic planning process, the college was reorganized as an Institute of Transdisciplinary Studies (ITS) and charged with the task of helping to integrate liberal and professional education at the university (Cremer 2007; Clevenger 2014). Key to this transformation was the self-conscious embrace of “transdisciplinarity,” a variant on “interdisciplinarity” with roots in the development psychology of Jean Piaget that stresses collaborative research, “real-world engagement, and constructive problem-solving” (Cremer 2007; Hyun 2011, 8). In the decade that followed, ITS and its founding director, Douglas Cremer, promoted a flexible approach to holistic course design that “scrapped the traditional surveys and went whole-hog into a comparative, interdisciplinary curriculum” (Cremer quoted in Clevenger 2014, 7). The ITS approach was so effective that in 2014 it was reorganized as the College of Transdisciplinarity with equal status to the Colleges of Architecture, Business and Media, and Culture and Design. “Transdisciplinarity” also has been adopted as one of four fundamental educational principals for the entire institution, along with design thinking, entrepreneurship, and civic engagement.

Berea College offers a final example of how interdisciplinary might help shape the future of independent higher education by providing a rationale for the more efficient use of instructional resources. In 2011, after extensive consultation with the faculty and campus community, Berea abolished its existing academic departments and replaced them with six multidisciplinary divisions. According to Shinn, who was president at the time, this move “fundamentally challenges a more than century-old disciplinary/departmental paradigm in American higher education,” though a number of other small institutions already operate through divisional structures (Shinn 2012, 18; also see Stripling 2010; Pearce 2014). The restructuring was prompted by the 2008–2009 financial crisis, which hit Berea, which does not charge tuition, especially hard. A small scenario-planning taskforce composed of faculty, staff, and administrators was charged with developing proposals that would reduce costs as much as possible while remaining true to the institutional mission to provide low-income students with a high-quality, tuition-free liberal arts education. The taskforce came back with three proposals that shared a common feature: replace departments with divisions. Importantly, “the case was made mainly on educational grounds,” with the argument that such a restructuring would promote “(a) excellence, flexibility, and innovation in Berea’s faculty and curriculum, (b) opportunities for increased faculty oversight of the whole curriculum, and (c) flexibility and cost management in the faculty and academic units’ budgets while continuing tenure” (Shinn 2012, 19). In addition to its budgetary benefits, the restructuring has indeed led to an increase in interdisciplinary teaching, more explicit attention to interdisciplinary pedagogy, and the inception of new divisional identities that “complement, never supersede” disciplinary identities. But the long-term impact of the change remains unclear (Pearce 2014).
Questions to Consider

Leaders of independent colleges and universities may want to consider the following questions about the introduction and support of interdisciplinary approaches to undergraduate education:

• For most institutions, the question is not whether to introduce interdisciplinary programs but “how best to structure these opportunities and ... measure their success” (Rhoten et al. 2006).

• What is the best mix of interdisciplinary and disciplinary instruction to achieve the desired student learning outcomes? What is the best way to evaluate the student learning outcomes of interdisciplinary education?

• Is general education the most appropriate curricular location for interdisciplinary education at your institution? Should interdisciplinary education in the liberal arts be seen or treated differently from undergraduate education in such professional fields as education, business, or nursing, which already typically incorporate multiple disciplines? Are interdisciplinary specializations, such as environmental biology or international relations, best studied in graduate school after majoring in a traditional academic discipline, such as biology or political science, at the undergraduate level?

• “How should institutions approach the calculation and allocation of resources for interdisciplinary programs? What are the decision-making criteria? Does the introduction of interdisciplinary activities lead to resource competition or resource sharing?” (Rhoten et al. 2006, 21) Note that interdisciplinary innovations can have an impact on institutional resources as diverse as library acquisitions, the allocation of teaching and office space, and the design of new academic buildings (Cotton and Johnson 2015).

• Is there a potential conflict between interdisciplinary curricular initiatives and existing institutional approaches to faculty hiring, faculty governance, program funding, or promotion and tenure? What policies would be most effective to recognize and reward faculty members and departments for interdisciplinary teaching?

• Is team teaching a necessary or desirable component of interdisciplinary education at your institution, whether for general education courses or upper-level courses? If so, what policies and resources may be required to encourage team teaching and manage its expense?

• Which stakeholders—faculty, students and their families, alumni, board members, donors, the potential employers of your graduates—consider traditional academic disciplines to be an essential element of the undergraduate education at your institution? Which, if any, consider interdisciplinary education to be essential to the future of your institution? How can interdisciplinarity support the mission of your institution? To what extent are interdisciplinary programs, present or proposed, about marketing and admissions rather than offering a solid education in the liberal arts?
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Suggestions for Further Reading

The Association for Interdisciplinary Studies (www.oakland.edu/ais) was founded in 1979 “to promote the interchange of ideas among scholars and administrators in all of the arts and sciences on intellectual and organizational issues related to furthering integrative studies.” The website includes extensive resources on the scholarship of interdisciplinary teaching and learning.

Wendy L. Hill, “Interdisciplinary Perspectives and the Liberal Arts,” in Remaking College: Innovation and the Liberal Arts, edited by Rebecca Chopp, Susan Frost, and Daniel H. Weiss (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), 85–95. Includes a strong argument for the unique capacity of liberal arts colleges (primarily smaller private institutions) to develop interdisciplinary programs and an overview of relevant literature on student learning outcomes.


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Steering Committee Members

Steven C. Bahls
Augustana College (IL)

Luis Maria R. Calingo
Woodbury University

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Johnson C. Smith University

Roger N. Casey
McDaniel College

Jeffrey R. Docking
Adrian College

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Hartwick College

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Dillard University

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John S. Wilson
Morehouse College

Cynthia Zane
Hilbert College
Career Preparation and the Liberal Arts

CIC Project on the Future of Independent Higher Education

July 2015
About the Project on the Future of Independent Higher Education

CIC’s Project on the Future of Independent Higher Education is a multi-year initiative to identify and examine the forces that are most likely to affect the future of independent colleges and universities and to help member institutions prepare for both new challenges and new opportunities. With the guidance of a steering committee of college and university presidents (see page 21), the project considers potentially disruptive changes to American society and education and explores fresh approaches to higher education and new college business models. The project also examines the distinctive characteristics and missions of independent colleges that have enabled them to offer a high-quality education for so many years. The project is supported by the Lumina Foundation for Education and the TIAA-CREF Institute.

Other Reports in This Series

This Research Brief is the third in a series of short papers on innovations in pedagogy and curriculum that may enhance student learning at independent colleges and universities. Each brief includes a review of recent literature, examples of how the innovation has been adopted by CIC members, discussion questions for further exploration, and recommendations for additional reading. The principal author is Philip M. Katz, CIC’s director of projects.

Research Brief 1: Competency-Based Education (April 2015)
Research Brief 2: Interdisciplinary Undergraduate Education (May 2015)

Research Briefs and other CIC research reports on the future of independent higher education can be downloaded from www.cic.edu/ResearchFuture.

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The Council of Independent Colleges (CIC) is an association of 755 nonprofit independent colleges and universities and higher education affiliates and organizations that has worked since 1956 to support college and university leadership, advance institutional excellence, and enhance public understanding of private higher education’s contributions to society. CIC is the major national organization that focuses on providing services to leaders of independent colleges and universities as well as conferences, seminars, and other programs that help institutions improve educational quality, administrative and financial performance, and institutional visibility. CIC conducts the largest annual conference of college and university presidents. CIC also provides support to state fundraising associations that organize programs and generate contributions for private colleges and universities. The Council is headquartered at One Dupont Circle in Washington, DC. For more information, visit www.cic.edu.
Career Preparation and the Liberal Arts

KEY POINTS:

• This brief explores a central question: How does the independent sector of higher education balance expectations for job preparation with the preparation of students for full lives as educated citizens?

• The debate about the role of liberal arts institutions in preparing students for careers is not new. But several trends have made the debate more intense since 2008: a greater emphasis on the short-term economic benefits of higher education, especially as the perceived cost of postsecondary education has risen; a higher percentage of undergraduate programs in professional fields; a more widespread perception that colleges and universities do a poor job of preparing students for the workforce; and, in reaction, resurgent concerns about too much emphasis on employability.

• The debates often ignore the demonstrated success of smaller independent colleges and universities with a liberal arts focus in preparing students for careers: Graduates of such institutions are at least as likely to find jobs in the first six months, will earn about as much in their lifetimes, and will enjoy a higher level of career satisfaction than their peers who graduate from other institutions.

• Smaller institutions achieve these outcomes through undergraduate programs with a professional emphasis that incorporate substantial liberal arts content; liberal arts degree programs that integrate career preparation; experiential learning opportunities, especially internships; and innovative career preparation activities that supplement the liberal arts curriculum. Career centers play an important role.
Introduction: Recent Trends

Any discussion of career preparation for undergraduate students at independent colleges and universities in the 21st century must consider at least five trends:

1) The first trend is the increasingly insistent public demand for a college education that directly and demonstrably prepares students for employment. A corollary is the recent upsurge of public doubts about the employment value of a college education, despite several economic studies since 2011 that demonstrate a larger lifetime gap in wages between college graduates and high school graduates than ever. The wage gap is now more than $1 million, according to researchers at the New York Federal Reserve (Carlson 2013; Abel and Deitz 2015). This trend is driven by an unsettled global economy and the sharp rise in college costs over the past decade. As higher education journalist Scott Carlson notes, looking at college explicitly in terms of its “return on investment,” measured in starting salaries and potential earnings, is something new—a confluence of anxieties about the rising cost of college, mounting debt among students, a flaccid economy, and the ubiquitous vocabulary of the market.... As rising college costs have loaded more and more debt onto the backs of Americans, the return-on-investment conversation seems inevitable (Carlson 2013).

As a result, three-quarters of independent college and university presidents report that there are “more conversations about getting ready for the job market today compared to just three years ago” (Selingo 2015a, 13).

Recent opinion surveys are clear about what students and their parents expect from a college education. More than ever, students want jobs. A New America survey of prospective and recently-enrolled college students conducted in 2014 concludes that the top reasons students decide to go to college are to “improve my employment opportunities,” “make more money,” and “get a good job” (Fishman 2015). The annual survey of first-year students conducted by UCLA’s Higher Education Research Institute returned similar results, with 86 percent of first-year students reporting that a very important reason to attend college was “to get a better job”; a decade earlier, 72 percent offered the same response (Eagan et al. 2015; also see Bidwell 2015 for comparable results from other polls). And a 2015 survey of parents by Robert Morris University (PA) concludes that, “as far as parents are concerned, the days of college being a place to focus on learning are over”; instead, more than half the parental respondents said that colleges need to pay more attention to “current labor needs and trends” (Thomsen 2015).

In the political sphere, workforce preparation is central to the Obama administration’s higher education agenda. At least 35 governors also noted the importance of higher education to economic and workforce development in their “state of the state” addresses at the start of 2015, underscoring the perceived role of higher education in addressing the nation’s continuing economic recovery (Emma 2015). Some governors have gone even further by singling out certain kinds of postsecondary education as worthy of state support and devaluing the role of other kinds of education. According to North Carolina Governor Pat McCrory, for example, “if you want to take gender studies, that’s fine, go to a private school and take it. But I don’t want to subsidize that if that’s not going to get someone a job” (Marcus 2013).

2) A second trend to consider is the gradual shift in emphasis from the liberal arts to vocational or pre-professional studies in the independent sector of higher education. By one estimate, the number of “true” liberal arts colleges, defined as teaching-focused undergraduate institutions that award at least 40 percent of their bachelor’s degrees in traditional liberal arts disciplines, shrank from 212 institutions in 1990 to no more than 130 today. This happened as private liberal arts colleges “added [more] programs in professional fields in order to attract vocationally
oriented students” (Baker, Baldwin, and Makker 2012). Some researchers date the beginning of this shift to the late 1960s (Breneman 1990; Baker, Baldwin, and Makker 2012). Others trace the start of a long, slow decline of liberal education in the United States to a much earlier date, noting that a “recurring theme in the history of American higher education is that the professional has been displacing the liberal” (Labaree 2006, 1; also see Teagle Foundation 2008, 18–21). As the president of a small private college lamented in 1938, “threats to the liberal-arts college have caused many privately supported colleges to establish their own professional departments and schools—business and teaching most often—thus dissipating their resources and weakening their position as strongholds of liberal training” (McConaughy 1938, 61).

Today, more than 60 percent of undergraduate degrees are awarded in vocational or professional fields across all sectors (Baker and Baldwin 2015, 248), although there is some disagreement among researchers about which majors should be categorized as “professional.” In 2013, the most recent year for which complete data are available, the most popular major for graduates of teaching-focused independent colleges and universities was business, representing 21 percent of all bachelor’s degrees—or about three times as many degrees awarded in the social sciences. Bachelor’s degrees in nursing outnumbered degrees in chemistry by a similar factor, and accounting majors outnumbered art history majors by 15-to-1. Independent institutions also awarded thousands of degrees in explicitly professional fields such as education, engineering, social work, and specialized medical and therapeutic occupations (CIC analysis of IPEDS data). Yet because the major printed on a student’s diploma does not fully define the content of the curriculum, the relative decline of the liberal arts as a component of postsecondary education may be overstated by comparing the percentages of degrees awarded.

3) A third trend is the widespread perception, especially among business leaders, students and their families, and some public observers, that colleges in general are doing a poor job of preparing students for the workforce. According to a recent Gallup survey, just 13 percent of American adults strongly agree with the statement, “College graduates in this country are well prepared for success in the workforce” (Gallup 2015, 15). Another survey in 2015 reported that barely one-third (35 percent) of college students believe that “college was effective in preparing them for a job,” and just 20 percent of these students think they are “very well prepared for the workforce” (McGraw-Hill Education 2015). In surveys conducted for the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), business leaders report that they want to hire college graduates who possess both a broad education and specific workforce skills, especially “written and oral communication skills, teamwork skills, ethical decision-making, critical thinking skills, and the ability to apply knowledge in real-world settings.” Business leaders also report that a minority of recent graduates are actually proficient in each of these desirable skill areas (Hart Research Associates 2015). In fact, as Peter Cappelli, professor of management at the University of Pennsylvania’s Wharton School, points out, there is “an enormous amount of complaining going on in the United States now by the employer community about difficulty in hiring people, finding people with the right skills. And much of that complaining seems to be directed at [higher] education” (Cappelli 2015).

These complaints are almost certainly too pessimistic, given the actual experience of college graduates in the workforce. The assessments of college leaders may be too optimistic in turn, however, as 78 percent of presidents from private institutions report that their students are “well prepared” or “very well prepared” for a job search (Selingo 2015a, 17), and 96 percent of chief academic officers in all sectors rate their institutions as very or somewhat effective in preparing students for the world of work (London 2015, 2). A Gallup researcher who helped conduct the survey of CAOs describes this self-assessment as “a massive disconnect between
higher education and the marketplace in terms of what it means to be prepared for work” and concludes that “the level of intentional collaboration between higher education and employers is downright pathetic at the moment” (London 2015, 2).

4) Meanwhile, many academic leaders and some public observers worry about the adverse effects of too much emphasis on pre-professional studies and employability instead of a focus on the liberal arts and general education. This is a fourth trend, though one with a deep history, as Americans have argued about the role of “practical” versus “liberal” studies in higher education since at least the early 19th century (Grubb and Lazerson 2006; Labaree 2006). Since 2008, there have been numerous articles in the popular and higher education press with titles such as “Is College Worth It?” and “Liberal Arts Education vs. Job Preparation for College Students: Have the Liberal Arts Become a Luxury?” and “Valediction for the Liberal Arts” (Carlson 2013; Cooperman 2012; Ferrall 2015). These articles have been answered by more nuanced discussions of the liberal arts’ return on investment, most recently in the 2015 books by Peter Cappelli (Will College Pay Off?) and journalist Fareed Zakaria (In Defense of a Liberal Education), but many in higher education still perceive a need to defend “the elements of a more well-rounded curriculum” (London 2015, 7).

The general argument in support of liberal education offered by independent college leaders, such as Gettysburg College (PA) president Janet Riggs, is that

Liberal arts colleges are focused on the development of critical thinking, communication, and teamwork skills, all of which are essential to solving the complex issues our globally interconnected world faces. We prepare students to be responsible citizens, individuals who will work to improve their communities. That value to our nation and the world might be harder to quantify than individual salary, but it’s no less important (Riggs 2013; also see Kiley 2012; CLASIC 2014; Schwartz 2014; Selingo 2015b).

A more specific argument is that narrowing the focus of a college education to vocational training narrows the range of career options for liberal arts majors. As Hofstra University President Stuart Rabinowitz puts it, a curriculum that focuses primarily on professional education

assumes that students begin their studies with a clear understanding of what they want to do with their lives after graduation.... But compelling students to make decisions based on perceived job opportunities that are four years in the future deprives them of the self-discovery that is the hallmark of a liberal arts education.... Students who approach their education purely in terms of occupational preparation may deprive themselves of the opportunity to find inspiration and excel in some other area of concentration (Rabinowitz 2013).

5) A final trend to note is the actual success of smaller independent institutions in preparing students for their first jobs and subsequent careers. During the depths of the recession that followed the financial crisis of 2008, researchers reported that many liberal arts graduates experienced higher unemployment rates and lower average earnings than other college graduates. These reports gave rise to stories in the popular media about liberal arts graduates flipping burgers and working as baristas, if they could find jobs at all. Both employment and earnings began to recover by 2011–2012, however. By the start of 2014, the unemployment rate for recent liberal arts graduates was 5.2 percent and the rate for mid-career liberal arts graduates (in their forties) was 3.5 percent, compared with a national unemployment rate of 6.6 percent (Carnevale and Cheah 2015; AAC&U 2014b).

An analysis of the graduating class of 2014 conducted by the National Association of Colleges
and Employers (NACE 2015) found that 80 percent of all bachelor’s degree graduates had achieved a “positive career outcome”—defined as full-time employment, self-employment, military or other public service, or continuing education—within six months of receiving a diploma. Graduates of private, nonprofit colleges had even better outcomes, with 89.5 percent achieving some positive career outcome at the six-month mark (including 58.5 percent with full-time jobs), compared to 73.4 percent of graduates from public institutions with positive career outcomes. Independent college graduates also had a higher mean starting salary ($50,386 versus $46,767). Graduates of smaller institutions had comparable or better outcomes than graduates of larger institutions. And, importantly, the graduates of colleges that focus on the liberal arts did just as well as the graduates of institutions that focus on professional education (i.e., institutions that confer 60 percent or more of their degrees to students in professional majors).

The NACE analysis of first destinations revealed more variation by undergraduate major than institutional type, with positive career outcome rates that ranged from 74 percent (biology majors) to 95 percent (communications technology majors). Mean starting salaries also ranged from a low of $29,000 for theology majors to a high of $64,891 for new engineers (NACE 2015, 19). Indeed, the initial wage gap between engineers and most liberal arts graduates persists for decades—but an analysis of Census data by AAC&U also shows that “at peak earnings ages (56–60 years), workers who majored as undergraduates in the humanities or social sciences earn annually on average about $2,000 more than those who majored as undergraduates in professional or pre-professional fields” (AAC&U 2014b).

Salary is just one measure of career success; job satisfaction is another. According to surveys of college graduates conducted in 2002 and 2011 by education consultants at Hardwick Day, graduates of independent liberal arts institutions report feeling more satisfied with their educations, better prepared to find a first job, and better prepared for life than their counterparts at public institutions or private research universities (Hardwick Day 2011). Three decades of research also demonstrate that liberal arts graduates “enjoy greater long-term rates of employability, income, and job satisfaction” (Teagle Foundation 2008, 12). By contrast, college graduates who major in business tend to become less engaged with their careers and less satisfied with their lives than graduates who major in the social sciences, science and technology fields, or the arts and humanities (Dugan and Kafka 2014).

As Chris Kimball, president of California Lutheran University, has noted, “There’s been a long tradition in American culture of saying [a liberal arts education] is not practical, not valuable. I think the evidence is pretty clear that for people who pursue that path, it leads to a richer and more successful life. Now obviously not everyone wants to pursue those degrees. But those who do—they gain a lot” (Bidwell 2015).

Persistent Issues

How independent colleges and universities should help prepare students for careers is not a new concern for the sector (Jones 1983; Ekman 2007). Four persistent and closely related issues stand out from the ongoing debate:

**Defining the proper balance between liberal and professional education**

The distinguished academic leader Ernest Lynton laid out the challenge of defining this balance in 1990, noting that

[The call] for more liberal [arts in] professional learning too often still consists merely of trying to squeeze a few more credits of liberal arts subject matter into an already crowded curriculum. There exist instances, as well, of going to the opposite and equally unsatisfactory extreme: to abandon all components of technical expertise and to concentrate only on process skills such as critical thinking and clarity of communication...
under the motto: “a liberal arts major is the best preparation for professional competence” (Lynton 1990, 6–7).

The perceived conflict between the “two cultures” of professional education and the liberal arts was highlighted during a national symposium on the liberal arts and business convened by CIC in 2007. According to the summary report, “the participants almost unanimously noted the tensions and conflicting perspectives between business and liberal arts faculty members,” even within the same institutions. “[A]s one participant put it, it seemed almost inevitable that the ‘fix it’ and ‘get a job’ perspective of business [and other professions] would clash with the ‘think and get cultured’ and ‘reflective’ perspective of the liberal arts” (Paris 2007, 41). Surprisingly little has changed in the intervening years (Baker and Baldwin 2015, 249).

**Understanding the contribution of the liberal arts to career preparation**

As CIC President Richard Ekman noted in 2007, following the national symposium discussed above, “definitions of the ‘liberal arts’ vary across time and even across contemporaneous institutions, [so] understanding their connection to careers in business becomes more difficult.” Moreover,

whenever someone tries to pinpoint the essential skills, perspectives, and knowledge that study of the liberal arts furnishes to those who subsequently enjoy successful business careers, the efforts are often too broadly conceived to account for differences among the disciplines of the arts and sciences, as well as differences in what is termed “business” (Ekman 2007).

Despite significant efforts in the past decade by AAC&U and other higher education associations to define the professional skills and competencies that liberal arts graduates ought to bring to the workplace, the causal link between the liberal arts and career success remains elusive and a topic worthy of additional research.

**Specifying the knowledge, skills, and perspectives that are needed for the 21st-century workplace**

Surveys of prospective employers are consistent about what they expect from college graduates today and for the near future: “both technical skills—the very focused learning associated with many master’s and doctoral programs—as well as the so-called ‘soft skills’ that often are honed in undergraduate liberal arts programs” (Brenau University 2014, quoting Brenau University president Ed Schrader). Looking more deeply into the future, however, alarmists such as Nobel laureate and Yale University professor Robert Schiller foresee that, “Computers and robots are already replacing many workers. What can young people learn now that won’t be superseded within their lifetimes by these devices and that will secure them good jobs and solid income over the next 20, 30 or 50 years? In the universities, we are struggling to answer that question” (Schiller 2015). Still other observers reject the “strange idea that employability reflects education and not the economy or the labor market,” and they argue that identifying and developing new workplace skills in a changing economy is less the job of colleges and universities than the responsibility of employers (Watters 2014; also see Cappelli 2015). Advocates for this position also note that employers often have more resources than small academic institutions to identify economic changes that demand new skills for employees.

**Understanding the difference between preparing students for their first jobs, for careers—and for fulfilling lives**

Most leaders of independent colleges and universities agree with Michael Roth, president of Wesleyan University (CT), that “college should prepare students for their first job—likely their worst job—but also ready them for a lifetime of meaningful work that contributes to making the world a better place” (Schwartz 2014). Many of these academic leaders believe that their institutions prepare students well for first jobs after graduation, and the NACE study
provides evidence to support this belief. Yet there remains a strong undercurrent of doubt, as voiced by the anonymous president of an independent liberal arts college: “We’re doing a great job educating our students for the job they’ll have in 20 years. However, we’re not doing a great job educating our students for the job they’ll have next year” (Jarrett and Martinsen 2015, 20).

Examples of Innovative Career Preparation at Independent Colleges and Universities

CIC member institutions rely on a number of approaches to combining the liberal arts with career preparation. The most common approach is a liberal arts core of required courses plus majors in both liberal arts and professional fields. This structure allows students to choose various combinations of majors, double majors, majors and minors, or concentrations to prepare themselves for postgraduate jobs and lifelong learning. More distinctive approaches include professional degree programs that incorporate substantial liberal arts content, liberal arts degree programs that integrate career readiness, internships and other experiential learning opportunities, and career preparation activities designed to supplement the liberal arts curriculum. The following section of this report illustrates such approaches with a few examples of recent innovations.*

This report will not consider graduate degree, certificate, or continuing education programs that are designed to prepare students for a specific profession or lead to a professional certification, although many independent colleges and universities offer high-quality programs of these kinds. Nor will it consider the role of national accrediting organizations, which prescribe detailed guidelines for a large number of professional undergraduate degrees, ranging from business, engineering, nursing, social work, and teaching to more specialized fields such as sonography and mortuary science (CHEA 2015).

An emphasis on professional training

Blending the liberal arts into business and other professional programs is an old strategy for independent colleges and universities (Jones 1983), but as Adrienne Blass, chief academic officer at Shenandoah University (VA), notes, “professional and pre-professional programs that have a strong liberal arts underpinning … [are especially] powerful in today’s market” (Bidwell 2015). The area of professional specialization in these programs is typically more responsive to market conditions than the liberal arts content. For example, after a close review of regional and national market conditions, in 2014 Rollins College (FL) introduced an undergraduate major in health care management that would be followed by three related master’s degree programs in 2015 and 2016. According to the director of the new programs, “health care is one of the more recession-proof industries” and demand for health care workers in South Florida is high. Some faculty members, however, needed to be convinced that the undergraduate program was consistent with the college’s liberal arts mission. “This is part of a bigger issue going on at Rollins,” says David Richard, dean of the college for working adults that will be home to all the health care programs: “What does a 21st-century liberal arts institution look like?” (Russon 2015). The result was a bachelor’s degree that incorporates existing courses in anthropology, business, communications, English, and psychology, as well as general education requirements and a health care-related internship.

Wheelock College in Massachusetts, with a domestic enrollment of about 900 undergraduates and 500 graduate students, has a distinctive mission: training students for professions that “improve the lives of children and families,” including education, social work, juvenile justice and youth advocacy, and child welfare (Jenkins-Scott 2014). It also offers a

*Except where noted elsewhere, the descriptions of academic programs in this section are based on information from the institutions’ public websites.
distinctive pedagogy built around field experience in which “undergraduate students are immediately exposed to professional practice in the field beginning freshman year with their [required] Human Growth and Development course and accompanying field placement...[including] fieldwork, practicum, and internship experiences that are interwoven with the academic program.” The field placements are responsive to changing community needs and employment trends. Despite this practical and experiential orientation, the college describes its educational “hallmarks” as “a solid foundation in the liberal arts and sciences, strong professional preparation, and a flexible, interdisciplinary approach.” The liberal arts are considered essential to support the social justice component of the institutional mission and are incorporated into all majors. Many students also pursue double majors in a helping profession and a liberal arts discipline such as American studies, environmental studies, mathematics, or the visual arts—and the latter majors always include field experiences directly related to the welfare of children and families.

Tim Ewest and Julie Kliegl, who teach business at Wartburg College (IA), describe four “broad approaches...for reconciling business education to the liberal arts,” approaches that also apply to undergraduate education in most other professional areas.

The first is to embrace liberal education as leadership education. The second is to enhance integrative and critical thinking in business education. The third is for business education to focus more attention on the ethical formation of the person, and the fourth is to integrate business and liberal arts curricula more closely (Ewest and Kliegl 2012, 79).

Of course, institutions have different strategies for integrating business education and the liberal arts. At Birmingham-Southern College (AL), the introductory course for business majors, Foundations of Business Thought, takes a humanistic “great books” approach that uses “classic and contemporary literature...to explore perceptions and opinions about business and the role individuals play in business organizations.” At Dominican University (IL), every undergraduate, even those pursuing majors in business or a professional field, participates in common Liberal Arts and Science Seminars that focus on ethical and spiritual issues related to work and life. By contrast, Shenandoah University offers a highly individualized bachelor of business administration program that pairs students with faculty mentors to tailor customized pathways that satisfy the accreditation requirements of the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) while assuring broad-based study in the liberal arts. All of these innovations were introduced before 2007 and they remain in place today (Ekman 2007; Paris 2007).

In 2015, the University of Evansville (IN) was ranked first in an independent listing of “30 Great Small Colleges for an Accounting and Finance Degree.” For several years, the bachelor of science in accounting program at Evansville has boasted a perfect record in helping new graduates secure a job or pursue advanced education in the field. The reason for this success, according to president Tom Kazee, is that “our students leave with a strong liberal arts foundation that makes them desirable to employers around the world,” which is reinforced by internships and other hands-on experiences (University of Evansville 2015). This throws some doubt on a recent review of best practices in accounting education which argued that undergraduate accounting programs should focus on technical skills—which is what instructors in the field “do best”—and that curricular reforms designed to develop “so-called soft skills” (such as ethics, team-building, communications skills, interpersonal skills, and critical thinking, all of which are strongly associated with the liberal arts) have been “misguided” (St. Pierre and Rebele 2014, 118).

The strong record of innovation by smaller independent colleges and universities to assure that undergraduate professional education is grounded in
the liberal arts was recently acknowledged by the Teagle Foundation. In 2014, the foundation announced a “Liberal Arts in the Professions” initiative designed to “fully embed liberal education throughout the curriculum, from the first year to the senior year, in professional undergraduate programs” (Teagle Foundation 2014). The initial grant recipients under this initiative included the Southeastern Pennsylvania Consortium for Higher Education, a regional coalition of eight CIC member institutions that will “explore how its member institutions can bring about substantive integration of the liberal arts into undergraduate preparation in teacher education, business, health, and technology” (Teagle Foundation 2015).

**Integrating career readiness**

Other CIC member institutions approach the blending of liberal arts and career preparation by focusing on liberal education first yet making sure that students have multiple opportunities to develop practical workforce skills. As early as 1968, for example, **Tougaloo College** (MS) introduced what is now called the “Interdisciplinary Career Oriented Humanities Major” (Jones 1983, 13–14). This degree program includes interdisciplinary general education courses, a concentration in a traditional humanities discipline, a carefully developed career plan, specialization in a career area, internships and cooperative education (which are recommended but not required), and an integrative capstone project (comprehensive exam and thesis).

Four decades later, in 2011, **Albion College** (MI) introduced the Albion Advantage, “an intentional, four-year educational model blending a liberal arts foundation with career readiness” (Randall 2011, 38). This initiative grew out of a planning process that began just before the economic crisis of 2008. According to Donna Randall, who was president at the time, the goals of the planning process were to address families’ concerns about college costs, meet competition from alternative sources of career preparation, demonstrate what was “value-added” in a residential liberal arts education, and strengthen Albion’s distinctive brand identity (Randall 2011, 38; also see Baker and Baldwin 2015, 253–54).

The Albion Advantage is summarized as “purposeful direction, practical knowledge, professional skills, and powerful connections,” but it also stresses “a solid grounding in the liberal arts [as] the best preparation for your life after college.” All Albion students are matched with a faculty mentor and an alumni mentor; encouraged to pursue multi-year academic research projects with real-world applications as well as off-campus experiences (job-shadowing, study abroad, internships, etc.) with a clear connection to their majors; and complete a four-year career plan with guidance from the campus Career and Internship Center and faculty mentors. The career plan incorporates both developmental tools, such as an interest assessment in the first year, and practical workforce skills, such as building a professional network through LinkedIn, writing a résumé, or applying to graduate school. To help promote this distinctive program, Albion tracks and shares on its website the career trajectories of recent graduates.

Like Albion, **Mount Holyoke College** (MA), a highly selective women’s college, faced the challenge of “articulat[ing] the value of a liberal education in a compelling way” in the midst of a national economic crisis. It responded by “build[ing] a bridge between the liberal arts curriculum and students’ careers” through an initiative called the Lynk. The program comprises four developmental stages. The first stage, goal setting, is marked by activities such as enhanced first-year advising and a day-long Sophomore Institute devoted to networking and career exploration. The second stage, professional development, includes non-credit business skill workshops and College 210: Ready for the World, a required, for-credit course for any student preparing to participate in an internship or intensive summer research project. The third stage, practical experience, includes summer internships and research projects, which are followed by a second required course, College 211: Tying It All Together.
Finally, the launch stage includes a series of public symposia for students to “showcase what they’ve learned both in the classroom and out of it, and to demonstrate the connection between those worlds” (AAC&U 2014a). There is no single prescribed path through these four stages. Instead, students work closely with multiple mentors and advisors drawn from the faculty, the career development center, and specialized academic centers on campus.

Although the Lynk initiative was designed fully to integrate academic and career preparation activities, there was some resistance from faculty members who were concerned that the liberal arts curriculum would be watered down in the process and that “vocational” training was “not my job” (Townsley, Packard, and Paus 2014/2015, 26). One response to these concerns was ongoing and intensive discussions with the faculty and staff members, supported by external funding. Another, says the college’s president, Lynn Pasquerella, was creating “parallel [administrative] structures so that Lynk is not any one department’s responsibility”; instead, every department’s strategic plan was explicitly tied to the success of the Lynk.

Finally, the career development center was moved to the college’s academic affairs unit to “make sure we never lose sight of the fact that it is all about the liberal arts and sciences” (AAC&U 2014a). The impact of the Lynk on the institution and its students is still being assessed, but criteria will include both the extent of faculty buy-in and student outcomes such as participation and postgraduate employment (Townsley, Packard, and Paus 2014/2015, 29).

Planning career pathways

Other independent colleges and universities have introduced multi-year career-planning pathways for their students. At Willamette University (OR), a residential liberal arts campus that enrolls about 2,000 undergraduates, a new strategic plan in 2013 included the goal that “every graduating senior will have a career plan.” To support that goal, the career center developed a detailed set of sequential action steps for each year on campus (plus a gap year). The recommended steps during senior year, for example, include developing a concrete job search strategy, joining a professional association, and “understanding your life’s priorities by putting first things first.” The director of career services also recruited faculty members to help “incorporate career awareness in class” (McKillop 2013). In some academic departments, completing the first part of the student Career Roadmap (a detailed self-assessment tool) has become a required course assignment, which is then followed by a classroom visit from a career center advisor and personalized advising from both faculty and staff members.

Students at Maryville College (TN) and Randolph-Macon College (VA) also are expected to develop personalized, four-year career preparation paths using structured menus of planning activities. A distinctive feature of Randolph-Macon’s program is an off-campus “Boot Camp,” intended primarily for sophomores, during which the students “retreat to a nearby hotel to polish their personal narratives, get advice from alumni, and attend a dinner designed to help them with etiquette” (Biemiller 2015).

At Stevenson University (MD), the career development plan is called the “Individualized Career Architecture Plan” (ICAP). ICAP is built on three legs—personal direction, discipline expertise, and professional know-how—in a conceptual structure that is introduced to first-year students through a popular team-building exercise involving LEGO blocks (Markley 2013). ICAP integrates self-assessment tools, faculty and staff advising, experiential learning opportunities, and personal branding to help students construct an individual strategic plan. The model has been so successful that Stevenson now offers a free online MOOC to introduce ICAP to career counselors at other colleges and universities.

Internships and other real-world experiences

As suggested by the examples above, internships are a common tool for undergraduate career exploration and preparation. Both academic leaders and potential employers agree that internships and other real-world
experiences—including short-term externships, field experiences, practicums or other clinical assignments, co-op experiences, community-based research, and project-based research with corporate partners—are valuable training. Indeed, nearly half (44 percent) of college presidents from all sectors surveyed by the Chronicle of Higher Education in 2015 said that their biggest concern when it comes to preparing students for careers was the “need to develop more opportunities for internships and other direct work experience” (Selingo 2015a, 18). Multiple studies reviewed by researchers at Georgetown University’s Center on Education and the Workforce show that students who complete paid internships “enter the labor market with substantially higher rates of receiving job offers and starting salaries than their peers” (Carnevale and Hanson 2015, 8). Students who complete unpaid internships, however, do not always receive the same immediate advantage on the job market, in part because there is “a large range in the quality ... [and level of supervision in] unpaid internships” (p. 10). Aside from their immediate benefit to some job seekers, internships as a form of pedagogy are considered high-impact practices, with notably positive effects on student learning, engagement, and retention. According to the latest results from the National Survey of Student Engagement, students at independent colleges and universities are more likely to participate in internships and related activities than their peers at other types of institutions (Gonyea and Kinzie 2015).

Founded as a women’s college in the depths of the Great Depression but coeducational since 1994, Endicott College (MA) proudly claims that it was “the first college in the country to require an internship as a part of its academic program.” Undergraduate students in most majors are now required to complete three substantial internships that relate to their field of study: 120-hour internships during the winter or summer breaks of both the first and second years and a full-semester, faculty-supervised, 12-credit internship during the fall semester of the senior year. The “internship program is fully integrated into the curriculum and is developmental in nature” (Endicott College 2012, 3). Internships are unpaid but completed as part of credit-bearing courses that also include a weekly on-campus meeting, and students are required to sign a formal “learning agreement” that incorporates learning outcomes as well as workplace expectations for the interns and the employers. Endicott employs a staff of 12 to coordinate more than 1,400 internships in a typical academic year.

Many other CIC member institutions require, encourage, or facilitate student internships. Some have taken additional steps to assure that first-generation students, who are more likely to come from families with relatively limited financial resources, can take equal advantage of internship opportunities. This form of support was identified as a best practice for first-generation student retention during the CIC/Walmart College Success Awards program (Strand 2013). For example, DePaul University (IL) and Kalamazoo College (MI) each offer competitive grants and targeted career counseling to help first-generation students pursue unpaid internships related to their academic studies or intended careers. The goal, according to Kalamazoo provost Michael McDonald, is to enable “first-generation students...to deeply engage in doing something over the summer besides really trying to earn money” (Lipka 2010).

Gettysburg College (PA) was another pioneer in connecting current undergraduates with real-world practitioners. In the early 1980s, Gettysburg developed a virtual mentoring network through its Alumni Career Tape Program, which gathered “taped interviews of Gettysburg alumni at their workplaces concentrate[ing] on the issues that liberal arts students face in making career decisions” (Jones 1983, 11). Today, Gettysburg still has an extensive alumni mentoring network, now web-based, as well as a robust program of networking dinners, job shadowing opportunities, three-day “Career Immersion Trips,” week-long competitive externships, and fellowships to support summer internships.
These co-curricular programs are coordinated by a center for career development, which also coordinates student internships and other career development activities during the academic year. Internships at Gettysburg may be paid or unpaid and may or may not be undertaken for academic credit; the relatively loose integration of internships with the formal curriculum is more typical than the tightly structured approach at Endicott College.

Some independent institutions have begun to introduce career preparation opportunities that are tied even less closely to other curricular or co-curricular activities on campus. For example, five CIC member institutions—Colorado College, Connecticut College, Denison University (OH), Whitman College (WA), and Mount Holyoke College (MA)—have partnered with Koru Careers, Inc. to provide “employer-embedded programs for current students and graduates, enhancing their skills, experience and connections that are needed to land jobs that make an immediate impact at today’s leading companies” (Denison University 2014). Koru, a Seattle-based start-up firm, offers a month-long business boot camp in conjunction with various companies in the technology and e-commerce sectors. The program costs about $2,750 per student plus travel and expenses, with limited financial aid available from some of the partner colleges. Unlike most traditional internships, the partner colleges are minimally involved in supervising the students or setting outcomes for the Koru programs. This is similar to other skills-based boot camps offered by for-profit providers such as General Assembly, FullBridge, and Kaplan, which may not involve college partners at all (Blumenstyk 2014; Watters 2014).

The assumption, according to one of Koru’s founders, is that college graduates “are not job ready. It’s not just the wrong skills, they are missing the right mindsets” (Adams 2015). The firm’s business model is to fill this perceived skills gap; as the website at www.joinkoru.com explains, the “Koru program is designed to complement your college education with applied experience and a business context. We’ve had art history majors hired at tech companies. Anything is possible.”

**Career service centers**

The most effective career preparation at independent colleges and universities usually involves both curricular and co-curricular activities and the engagement of both faculty and staff members. Two recent reports on career service centers highlight the changing role of these significant campus offices and their impact on students’ career preparation. The first report, from Hanover Research (2012), summarizes the biggest change: “Traditionally focused on job placement and informational resources, current career service units are characterized by an increased commitment to holistic and ongoing career preparation” (p. 2, emphasis in the original; also see McKillop 2013).

Willamette University and other institutions discussed above provide evidence of this change in focus. So do a number of independent institutions that participate in the Network for Vocation in Undergraduate Education (NetVUE). They use their career centers to anchor curricular and co-curricular activities that encourage students to explore the intellectual and theological dimensions of vocation in the context of career development. At Point Loma Nazarene University (CA), for example, the combined Offices of Strengths and Vocation offer traditional career services such as internships, mentoring, and networking. But they also offer an integrated set of activities designed to help students discern their individual strengths for both career and faith development, as well as targeted seminars on topics shaped by the institution’s mission, such as “Strengths and Your Faith” and “The Socially Responsible Business Owner.” The CORE Center at Augustana College (IL) brings together campus support for career services, opportunities for experiential learning, student research, and the exploration of vocation. A recommended plan of annual activities to prepare students for postgraduate life incorporates a vocational journey of self-assessments, mentoring,
and advising designed, in part, to help job-seeking seniors appreciate the distinction between changeable employment and durable vocations. Another approach is under development at Saint Peter’s University (NJ), which is using a competitive grant from NetVUE to implement a Life Portfolio Project. Starting in their first year, students will use the portfolio to reflect on academic, co-curricular, and vocational activities from a Jesuit perspective. Then, “with the assistance of advisors, faculty, and representatives from the departments of career services and campus ministry, students will use the data in the Life Portfolio to help them discern choices for internships, graduate schools, and other career-related options” (Saint Peter’s University 2015).

The second report on career centers, from the Consortium of Liberal Arts Schools and Independent Colleges (CLASIC) in southern California, also summarizes current trends in career center operations and identifies a number of specific innovations at independent colleges and universities. Again, the overarching trend is that “institutions invested in a higher return on investment for their liberal arts majors are actively pursuing opportunities to embed career services in the greater college experience” (CLASIC 2014, 6). Embedding career services in this manner demands “high touch, highly collaborative models that require the involvement and support of various constituents across campus communities in partnership with career services...[as well as using technology to create] an increasingly accessible global network. It also demands the development, clarification, and implementation of student learning outcomes and the establishment of feasible methodologies which produce direct evidence of these outcomes” (p. 8). The CLASIC report advocates for several best practices: reorganizing reporting structures to make academic advising and career development part of the same division, as at Biola University (CA); engaging faculty in developing major-specific approaches to career planning, as at Messiah College (PA), which also is a NetVUE member; and collecting better data about student outcomes, ideally at the five-year-out stage to “account for an exploratory process common among liberal arts and humanities students” (p. 7).

Unfortunately, for all of these positive trends, the results of the latest student workforce readiness survey from McGraw-Hill Education show that career service centers are a relatively underused campus resource: About one-quarter of college students say they have never used career services and just 14 percent say they use career services frequently. Unsurprisingly, given these numbers, less than one-third of students believe that the career offices are effective (McGraw-Hill Education 2015). According to David Delong, a “smarter workforce” consultant associated with the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, “Motivating students to engage early and often in the career development process may be the greatest challenge facing higher education leaders today” (Delong 2014).
Questions to Consider

The leaders of independent colleges and universities may want to consider the following questions about preparing students for future jobs and careers:

- How can independent colleges and universities, individually and collectively, challenge the perception that liberal arts institutions do a relatively poor job of preparing students for jobs and careers? What can institutions do to become more explicit about the kinds of career preparation they offer and the positive career outcomes of their students? How can institutions help students understand and explain the value of their education to potential employers?

- How can institutions do a better job of tracking and publicizing the career success of their graduates? Note that the National Association of Colleges and Employers has developed a set of recommended standards for collecting student data, and the website of St. Olaf College (MN) offers an especially clear example of tracking and presenting student career outcomes (see http://wp.stolaf.edu/outcomes/what-happens-after-graduation).

- How can independent institutions challenge the perception held by many students, their families, and public observers that economic success is the primary purpose of higher education? This may be especially important for first-generation college students, who face additional pressures to pursue clear vocational paths.

- How can institutions engage all staff and faculty members, including those in the liberal arts, in the preparation of students for the workforce and careers? How can they make sure that faculty members in professional programs are likewise engaged with the liberal arts or general education curricula? How can institutions “actively pursue[ ] opportunities to embed career services in the greater college experience” (CLASIC 2014, 6)? How can they assure that career centers have the necessary resources and responsibility to help students develop career paths over multiple years?

- What resources should institutions devote to undergraduate internships and other experiential learning opportunities? As noted, “provid[ing] more internships and work/study programs that enable students to immerse themselves in the world of work and learn professional skills through direct experience” can be a highly effective approach to career preparation, especially when the internships are paid, well integrated with the undergraduate curriculum, and closely supervised. But internships can involve pedagogic trade-offs, as “this type of on-the-job training [might] have to either substitute for time spent in the classroom—thereby watering down the curriculum—or extend the time needed to graduate” (London 2015, 5).
One defining feature of independent colleges is their responsiveness to new student needs and changes in the external environment. But the employment market can change more rapidly than even the nimblest institutions, while “concrete business skills tend to expire in five years or so as technology and organizations change” (Glenn 2011). How should institutions decide which economic changes, nationally or regionally, require new programs or the allocation of new resources—and which existing programs no longer match current economic needs? Where is the appropriate line between preparing graduates for new opportunities in a changing economy and what one journalist describes as “rolling out trendy job-specific majors” (O’Neill 2001)?
References

Note: All web links were working and accurate at the time of publication.


The Council of Independent Colleges


Suggestions for Further Reading


Tim Ewest and Julie Kliegl, “The Case for Change in Business Education: How Liberal Arts Principles and Practices Can Foster Needed Change,” Journal of Higher Education Theory and Practice 12:3 (2012), 75–86. www.nabusinesspress.com/IHETP/KlieglJ_Web12_3_.pdf. Although this article by two Wartburg College faculty members focuses on undergraduate business education, the analysis and practical recommendations for “reconciling” the liberal arts and professional training can be applied to many other vocational majors.


Project on the Future of Independent Higher Education
Steering Committee Members

Chris Kimball (Chair)
California Lutheran University

Steven C. Bahls
Augustana College (IL)

Ronald L. Carter
Johnson C. Smith University

Roger N. Casey
McDaniel College

Jeffrey R. Docking
Adrian College

Margaret L. Drugovich
Hartwick College

Elizabeth A. Fleming
Converse College

Thomas F. Flynn
Alvernia University

Christopher B. Howard
Hampden-Sydney College

Todd S. Hutton
Utica College

Walter M. Kimbrough
Dillard University

Larry D. Large
Oregon Alliance of Independent Colleges and Universities

Paul J. LeBlanc
Southern New Hampshire University

Mary B. Marcy
Dominican University of California

John McCardell
Sewanee: The University of the South

Kevin M. Ross
Lynn University

Ed L. Schrader
Brenau University

Elizabeth J. Stroble
Webster University

Henry N. Tisdale
Claflin University

Edwin H. Welch
University of Charleston

John S. Wilson
Morehouse College

Cynthia Zane
Hilbert College
Living-Learning Communities and Independent Higher Education

CIC Project on the Future of Independent Higher Education

October 2015
About the Project on the Future of Independent Higher Education

CIC’s Project on the Future of Independent Higher Education is a multi-year initiative to identify and examine the forces that are most likely to affect the future of independent colleges and universities and to help member institutions prepare for both new challenges and new opportunities. With the guidance of a steering committee of college and university presidents (see page 17), the project considers potentially disruptive changes to American society and education and explores fresh approaches to higher education and new college business models. The project also examines the distinctive characteristics and missions of independent colleges that have enabled them to offer a high-quality education for so many years. The project is supported by the Lumina Foundation for Education and the TIAA-CREF Institute.

Other Reports in This Series

This Research Brief is the fourth in a series of short papers on innovations in pedagogy and curriculum that may enhance student learning at independent colleges and universities. Each brief includes a review of recent literature, examples of how the innovation has been adopted by CIC members, discussion questions for further exploration, and recommendations for additional reading. The principal author is Philip M. Katz, CIC’s director of projects.

Research Brief 1: Competency-Based Education (April 2015)
Research Brief 2: Interdisciplinary Undergraduate Education (May 2015)
Research Brief 3: Career Preparation and the Liberal Arts (July 2015)

Research Briefs and other CIC research reports on the future of independent higher education can be downloaded from www.cic.edu/ResearchFuture.

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The Council of Independent Colleges (CIC) is an association of 755 nonprofit independent colleges and universities and higher education affiliates and organizations that has worked since 1956 to support college and university leadership, advance institutional excellence, and enhance public understanding of private higher education’s contributions to society. CIC is the major national organization that focuses on providing services to leaders of independent colleges and universities as well as conferences, seminars, and other programs that help institutions improve educational quality, administrative and financial performance, and institutional visibility. CIC conducts the largest annual conferences of college and university presidents and chief academic officers. CIC also provides support to state fundraising associations that organize programs and generate contributions for private colleges and universities. The Council is headquartered at One Dupont Circle in Washington, DC. For more information, visit www.cic.edu.
Living-Learning Communities and Independent Higher Education

KEY POINTS:

• Living-learning communities combine curricular, co-curricular, and residential components of college life. They are a relatively new variation on the residential education that has been part of the undergraduate experience at America’s independent colleges and universities for centuries.

• Research suggests that living-learning communities have a positive impact on academic performance, intellectual development, civic engagement, and the smooth transition of first-year students into college life, among other desirable student outcomes.

• Challenges to developing and maintaining effective living-learning programs include difficulties related to assessment, faculty participation, collaboration between academic affairs and student affairs, and program costs.

• Independent colleges and universities have developed living-learning communities for a wide range of student populations—first-year students, first-generation students, upper-class students with specific academic interests, even commuters—in a variety of residential settings from traditional dorms to yurts.
Introduction

Residential education has been part of the undergraduate experience at America’s independent colleges and universities since the colonial era. The living-learning communities described in this research brief, however, are a relatively new phenomenon. These communities combine curricular, co-curricular, and residential components in a purposeful way to encourage collaboration among students, faculty members, and staff and thus enhance students’ academic and social development. Despite a few earlier experiments, most of today’s living-learning communities are the result of innovations that began in the 1980s in the wake of public criticism that challenged higher education to “increase community, respond to an ever more diverse student population, and expand access to postsecondary education as an option for all” (Dean and Dunn 2013; also see Spear et al. 2003, Penven et al. 2013).

Living-learning communities (LLCs for short) can be defined in simple spatial terms as “residence hall-based undergraduate programs with a particular topical or academic theme” (Inkelas and Soldnar 2011, 1) or in simple functional terms as “structured programmatic interventions that bring students and faculty members together in meaningful ways and include students living together” (Dunn and Dean 2013, 12). Because living-learning communities are called by many other names as well, including living-learning programs, residential learning communities, living-learning centers, theme houses, and residential colleges, they can be difficult to define precisely; indeed, one influential typology includes 17 different categories of LLCs, broken down further into 41 types. These range from “a handful of students living together because they share common academic interests to a four-year, degree-granting, residential ‘college-within-a-college’” (Brower and Inkelas 2010, 36; also see Inkelas and Soldnar 2011).

One curricular model that is common especially for first-year students, involves paired or clustered courses. In this model, small groups of students are enrolled in the same two (or sometimes more) courses, which usually are scheduled as a block but taught separately. One course will often be content-based and the other skill-based, such as a first-year seminar and a writing course. Other popular models include residence-based cohorts of students enrolled in larger courses or specific majors, which may involve student peers or faculty members as discussion leaders to help synthesize the subject matter; team-taught programs with “a cohort of students in two or more courses organized around an interdisciplinary theme”; and communities that closely integrate residential life with a coordinated curriculum that makes up all or most of a student’s coursework (Price 2005, 6–7; Shapiro and Levine 1999). Living-learning communities almost always have a dedicated living space, may have faculty members and/or student affairs staff in residence, and usually provide opportunities for service learning and “ample...extracurricular activities, such as student-faculty retreats, theater productions, parties, and group dinners” (Price 2005, 7).

The number of living-learning communities in the United States and their distribution by institutional type are unknown. As of September 2015, the list of living-learning programs maintained by the Association of College and University Housing Officers-International (http://rlc.acuho-i.org), which is based on voluntary reports, included just 89 American campuses, with 11 CIC member institutions among them. A systematic but hardly comprehensive search of the internet revealed several dozen more CIC institutions with LLCs, a sampling of which is featured in this report. A survey conducted by the Gardner Institute for Excellence in Undergraduate Education in 2011 reported that nearly half of all private institutions had some kind of living-learning community program in place for first-year students, but that is just one student population—and the researchers cautioned that small private institutions were underrepresented in the sample (Stier 2014, 38; Barefoot and Koch 2011). The evidence is sufficient, however, to conclude
along with a pair of recent observers that “living-learning communities are commonplace” (Dunn and Dean 2013, 12).

Living-learning communities are a subset of intentional learning communities, not all of which include residential components but otherwise share similar goals. A recent dissertation by Mark M. Stier (2014), an experienced student affairs officer at a public liberal arts college, summarizes the common characteristics of learning communities as reflected in the extensive literature generated by researchers and practitioners since the 1980s. Stier concludes that effective learning communities are all designed to accomplish the following:

1) Create an environment where all participants are identified as contributing members;
2) Provide physical space for members to interact in transformative learning activities;
3) Create an environment conducive to new membership;
4) Develop a seamless learning experience between academics and out of classroom activities;
5) Build bridges between different disciplines; and
6) Allow for opportunities for developing complex thinking skills, social cognition, and creativity (Stier 2014, 40).

Drawing upon more than a decade of research by the National Study of Living-Learning Programs, Brower and Inkelas identify three characteristics of highly successful living-learning communities in particular: “a strong student affairs–academic affairs presence and partnership”; “clear learning objectives with strong academic focus throughout the program”; and the ability to “capitalize on community settings to create opportunities for learning wherever and whenever it occurs” (Brower and Inkelas 2010, 42).

Living-Learning Communities and Student Outcomes

Residential colleges have proven value. Even without the added value of LLCs, on-campus housing “provides a great deal of return to the students who choose to live in the residence halls,” with a demonstrated positive impact on degree attainment at undergraduate institutions of all sizes and types (McCuskey 2015). A half-century of education research also has revealed a clear link between student success—whether defined as student persistence and completion, cognitive development, or student engagement—and high-quality interactions between students and faculty members and among students themselves. LLCs are especially effective at encouraging such interactions (Brower and Inkelas 2010; Inkelas and Soldner 2011; McCuskey 2015).

Based on a detailed meta-analysis of research literature published between 1980 and 2010, Inkelas and associates conclude that participation in living-learning communities is associated with a range of desirable student outcomes including “academic performance, persistence, intellectual development, faculty and peer interaction, the transition to college, campus life, satisfaction, academic engagement and co-curricular involvement, attitudes and beliefs, self-efficacy, and psychosocial development” (Inkelas and Soldner 2011, 2; also see Brower and Inkelas 2010). Thus, compared with students who live in traditional college housing, students who participate in living-learning communities:

- Make smoother academic and social transitions to college;
- Report higher levels of informal faculty mentorship;
- Are more likely to apply critical thinking skills;
- Are more likely to apply knowledge in new settings;
- Are more committed to civic engagement;
- Are more likely to become peer mentors; and
• Binge drink less and experience fewer of the other negative effects of drinking.

Furthermore, undergraduate women who live in LLCs demonstrate a stronger sense of belonging, more academic self-confidence, and more professional self-confidence than their peers who live in traditional college housing. Some evidence suggests additional benefits for first-generation students in living-learning communities, but the research on this topic is inconclusive. (This summary of current research is drawn primarily from the two cited reports by Inkelas and associates; Conte 2015; and SILLP, “Research Findings.”)

Living-learning communities also probably contribute to student persistence, but Inkelas and Soldner (2011) warn that the research evidence for this outcome is too thin to be conclusive. Indeed, scholars disagree about the magnitude and statistical validity of the various effects listed in the previous paragraph. Because so much of the research is based on small case studies, it is hard to generalize the results or draw distinctions between different sectors of higher education; larger samples and more rigor would be required (Inkelas and Soldner 2011, 41–49; Kilgo, Sheets, and Pascarella 2015). Importantly, a new national research initiative is likely to provide more rigorous evidence for the effectiveness of LLCs. The Study of Integrated Living Learning Programs (SILLP), directed by Matthew J. Mayhew, associate professor of higher education at New York University, will begin collecting data from participating colleges and universities in spring 2016. SILLP incorporates an “empirically validated measure of college student experiences with living learning programs” and is designed to provide institutions with an assessment and benchmarking tool. The focus of the study is “the relationships between institutional structures, forms of student engagement, and student academic, intellectual, and social outcomes” (SILLP, “The Study”).

At present, it cannot be stated with certainty whether living-learning communities are more pervasive or more effective at independent colleges and universities. In fact, according to the latest results from the National Survey of Student Engagement, first-year students at independent colleges and universities are slightly less likely to participate in learning communities than their peers at public institutions—but more likely to have participated in learning communities than their public peers by the time they graduate (Gonyea and Kinzie 2015). By their nature, however, small residential campuses tend to offer more opportunities for informal learning communities. This is one reason why the residential model of small liberal arts colleges has been so extensively mimicked by larger institutions, especially in the form of honors colleges (Kimball 2014). The explicit rationale has been to “humanize the scale of higher education and promote community” (Smith 2001)—that is, to recreate the learning environment afforded by most independent colleges and universities. In turn, independent liberal arts colleges have adopted freely from living-learning community models developed at other kinds of institutions with the understanding that these formal communities are a supplement to the “sense of belonging” that already characterizes many small residential institutions (Mount Holyoke College 2014; also see Penven et al. 2013, Spear et al. 2003).

The existing evidence of close student-faculty interactions and measurable gains in student outcomes fostered by LLCs may provide independent colleges and universities with specific examples of the importance of resource-intensive forms of educational experience to counteract recent public attacks on the cost-effectiveness and student benefits of residential education. Conservative political analyst Michael Barone sums up one line of criticism by noting that “The residential college model, with its bloated ranks of coddler/administrators, has become hugely expensive and increasingly dysfunctional. It’s overdue for significant downsizing” (Barone 2015; also see Lawler 2014). Other critics focus on “amenity-driven residence halls” or campus appurtenances such as climbing walls (Penven et al. 2013, 123–125;
In response, many leaders of independent institutions, such as Scott D. Miller, president of Virginia Wesleyan College, assert that “Student-centeredness is the currency of the small college, where value-added is defined not simply by student creature comforts but by access to their fellow creatures—devoted faculty and staff who proudly commit to students’ success in every arena of their lives” (Miller 2014). Living-learning communities provide particular evidence of this impact, though the evidence must be considered with caution.

**Challenges**

Major challenges to developing and sustaining living-learning communities include program assessment, faculty recruitment and retention, insufficient collaboration between academic and student affairs staff, and program costs.

The growth of living-learning communities since the 1980s has not always been matched by “calls to assess whether [such communities] could live up to their lofty reputations” (Inkelas and Soldner 2011, 17). The shortage of rigorous sector-wide assessments contributes to the tentativeness of some of the research findings listed above. Yet many individual colleges and universities successfully track the impact of living-learning communities on their own students (Lardner 2014), relying on institutional retention data, customized student surveys (Eck, Edge, and Stephenson 2007; Otterbein University 2013), and standard instruments for measuring student engagement or intellectual and social development, such as the National Survey of Student Engagement (Kilgo, Sheets, and Pascarella 2015). Researchers associated with the National Resource Center for Learning Communities recommend the following essential best practices for assessing any undergraduate learning community:

1. Articulate agreed-upon learning community program goals;
2. Identify the purpose of assessment (e.g., summative or formative);
3. Employ qualitative and quantitative assessment methods for assessing the most critical outcomes for administrative and instructional team-member decision-making processes;
4. Employ indirect and direct measures of student learning; and
5. Ensure that assessment results are used by campus decision makers (Huerta and Hansen 2013).

A 2007 survey conducted by the National Study of Living-Learning Programs, which included both public and private institutions and remains the most comprehensive snapshot of living-learning communities to date, found that faculty involvement in LLC programs was “overall, quite low…. Twenty-three percent included no faculty participation whatsoever, and 64 percent utilized somewhere between one and three faculty members.” In many cases, faculty involvement was limited to teaching courses and academic advising, with student affairs staff members taking a much larger role in developing co-curricular and extracurricular activities (Brower and Inkelas 2010, 39). Team-teaching, a component of some but not all LLCs, frequently requires more time and effort from faculty members and can be implicitly discouraged by academic departments or divisions (CIC 2015, 2–3). Similarly, “because the most integrated learning communities require advance planning and intensive faculty collaboration, many professors and instructors (especially those with large teaching loads) may be reluctant to offer learning communities without commensurate course-release time or additional compensation” (Price 2005, 17). Even at many small, student-focused institutions, tenure and promotion policies do not encourage or reward faculty members who commit their time to living-learning communities; instead, participating faculty members are often motivated by their own sense of the importance of student-faculty interactions outside of the classroom (Kennedy 2011; Sriram et al. 2011).
The 2007 survey by the National Study of Living-Learning Programs found that nearly half (47 percent) of living-learning communities were managed by student affairs offices, while just 21 percent were directed by someone in an academic department. Another 13 percent were co-directed by representatives of academic affairs (which could be a staff member rather than a faculty member) and student affairs (Brower and Inkelas 2010). Although many researchers emphasize “the importance of partnerships between academic and student affairs units in order to operate effective [living-learning communities],” the literature offers surprisingly few examples of how institutions have bridged the different cultures, perspectives on students, assessment models, and budget priorities that academic and student affairs staff bring to their work (Inkelas and Soldner 2011, 18–19). When administrative responsibilities for LLCs are not clearly defined or well-coordinated, there can be poor alignment between curricular and co-curricular activities, ineffective assessment (Dunn and Dean 2013, 18–19), or disputes over operating budgets, as in the following scenario:

[Consider] the challenges of developing an integrated living-learning center within the structure of traditional budgets that call for money to flow through either academics or residential areas. If the “living units” are physically located above the “learning spaces” and the funding for maintenance of spaces follows traditional silos, whose budget pays for a shower leak that drips from the living space into the learning space? (Bickford and Wright 2006).

Additional costs are almost always a challenge for living-learning communities. Building or renovating residence halls that incorporate common spaces and learning spaces may be more expensive than constructing other student housing options (Penven et al. 2013, 123); customized residential experiences are more complicated to administer than standardized housing units; and living-learning communities demand extra time from faculty and staff members. In addition, fees for co-curricular or extracurricular activities sometimes present a barrier to student participation in LLCs (Skurla and Sandvall 2015), and the rising cost of on-campus housing at independent colleges may make living-learning communities an unrealistic option for students who want to live off-campus or must live at home.

Limited access to living-learning communities, due to the expense, a lack of space, or other constraints on institutional resources, can have undesirable consequences. Baylor University (TX), for example, developed a first-year residential program for engineering students that significantly raised retention rates. This success became a selling point for the program, which was “quickly outgrown.” According to Carolyn Skurla and Emily Sandvall, faculty members in the Baylor engineering department, “the LLC experience has been beneficial to students, [but] this residential option is expensive, and space is limited. Not all students wishing to live in this community can be accommodated.” Some accepted students have enrolled in other colleges when they could not be accommodated. And “anecdotal evidence indicates that some non-LLC students feel disenfranchised because programming and [academic resources] that LLC students have access to are not available to them” (Skurla and Sandvall 2015). Based on this experience, Skurla and Sandvall call for more attention to the students who cannot be included in the living-learning community.

Weighing the costs of living-learning communities against the benefits of alternative strategies for student engagement, some researchers reiterate that “simple structures that facilitate student interaction around academic work (even without coordinated faculty involvement [or co-residency]) have a positive effect for students,” which should “encourage ... campus leaders with limited resources who are working to develop methods for improving the undergraduate educational experience on their campuses” (Stassen 2003).
A final challenge to successful living-learning communities worth noting is the intensity of the residential experience itself. As one early critic of living-learning communities argued, residence halls “[should be] decompression chambers instead of pressure cookers” (Gordon 1974, 239). Living with other students in a college residence hall can help build a tremendous sense of belonging and foster a supportive network of peers (Spanierman et al. 2013), but it also can bring out less agreeable traits and feed interpersonal tensions. The intense peer interactions within living-learning communities may exacerbate both tendencies. Faculty members also can feel the pressure of LLCs, especially when they lack a clear understanding of program goals, student expectations, or boundaries between their roles as instructors, academic advisors, informal mentors, and members of a residential community (Kennedy 2011). Yet many faculty members also are energized when “the boundaries between academic and non-academic discussions become constructively blurred as they interact with all parts of a student’s life.” These experiences can have a positive impact on their teaching practices (Sriram et al. 2011, 46).

Examples of Innovations in Living-Learning Communities at Independent Colleges and Universities

CIC member institutions offer their undergraduate students an impressive range of living-learning communities.* These offerings include LLCs designed specifically for first-year students; residential communities built around a common theme or student interest, or around academic majors or other curriculum components; LLCs designed for special populations of students; and some programs that take advantage of unique residential settings to provide highly integrated learning experiences.

First-year students are the most common beneficiaries of living-learning communities, and the increasing, systematic attention paid to the first-year experience in general since the 1980s has led to a steady expansion of LLCs as a programmatic offering (Laufgraben 2005; Zeller 2005). The First-Year Program at St. Lawrence University (NY) was an early innovator (Spear et al. 2003, 29–35) and is now promoted on the university’s website as “one of the oldest living-learning programs in the country, helping students make successful transitions from high school to college, intellectually and socially, since 1987.” During their first semester, all entering students in a class of about 600 are enrolled in small sections of an interdisciplinary, team-taught course that integrates a broad thematic topic with an “elaborate writing skills sequence” and “formal instruction in oral communication.” The same faculty members who teach this course also serve as the students’ academic advisors; faculty offices are located in the residence halls; and they collaborate with student affairs staff members (some of whom are in residence) to plan co-curricular activities related to the course themes. During the second semester, students enroll in follow-up seminars that bring together students from all the first-year residence halls while retaining the emphasis on written and oral skills. The students remain with the same academic advisors and student affairs staff members for the entire year. Student representatives from each living-learning community also participate in a first-year council designed to introduce the new college students to leadership roles and social opportunities across the institution.

The early development of living-learning communities at St. Lawrence directly inspired several other independent colleges and universities to implement their own LLCs for first-year students, including St. John Fisher College (NY). In the early 1990s, Fisher was faced with declining enrollments and a high first-year attrition rate. In response, the institution piloted an optional living-learning community with two, three, or four common courses

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*Except where noted elsewhere, the descriptions of academic programs in this section are based on information from the institutions’ public websites.
for small first-year cohorts. The pilot soon became a permanent, mandatory program for all entering students when it was observed that retention rates rose by as much as 9 percent (Spear et al. 2003, 24–28). The first-year program at Fisher has continued to evolve and now combines living-learning communities—anchored by a one-credit seminar taught in small residential cohorts—with learning communities of linked thematic and writing courses designed for first-year students who are not necessarily in the same housing units. The first-year retention rate remains very high at 88 percent (in 2013).

The first-year program at Rollins College (FL), introduced in 2003, shares many characteristics with the established programs at the two New York institutions, suggesting the development of a fairly standard model, at least for institutions that primarily attract students of traditional undergraduate age. The Rollins program began as a pilot for 20 percent of the entering class and expanded to half the first-year class within a few years. A rigorous assessment in 2007 demonstrated significant gains in student engagement and integration to college life, so participation is now required of all entering students (Eck, Edge, and Stephenson 2007). All students in a residential cohort take at least one seminar together and usually have a second shared course, all built around a common curricular theme that was introduced in 2014—“imagining the future.” The students “meet together in [the residence] hall to share reading, assignments, presentations, discussions, and other academic programming designed by their faculty and peer educators.” A faculty member is in residence, as are specially trained upper-class resident assistants who serve as “academic and social role models ... to better integrate and engage first-year students.”

First-year students are not the only target population for living-learning communities. Recognizing the positive impact of their first-year programs, a number of independent colleges and universities have developed LLCs for second-year students as well. In 2011, for example, Assumption College (MA) introduced SOPHIA, the Sophomore Initiative at Assumption College. This initiative extended the work of a successful first-year LLC program called “Tagaste”—after the birthplace of St. Augustine—that also combines academic, social, and spiritual themes appropriate to the institution’s Augustinian religious heritage. SOPHIA is “specially designed to help students discover a deeper connection between their spiritual, personal, and professional lives.” The 24 participants, selected via competitive application, live in the same residence hall, take at least one shared course each semester, and participate in weekly meals, monthly outings with a core group of four faculty mentors, and a retreat each semester. The common courses are designed to explore themes related to religious and personal meaning of vocation, with subjects such as “Living Lives that Matter” and “Classics of Spiritual Direction.” The initiative also includes an optional capstone experience: a trip to Rome for two weeks of “intensive focus on community, reflection, and mentoring.” The SOPHIA program was inspired by Assumption’s participation in the Network for Vocation in Undergraduate Education (which is administered by CIC) and developed with the support of a grant from the Teagle Foundation (WoodBrooks 2015).

Looking even further beyond the first year of college, Marietta College (OH) announced the construction of a new residence hall in 2011 designed, in part, to help prepare “seniors for life after college” through career preparation courses and life skills taught in a residential setting (Marietta College 2011). This approach incorporates lessons learned from a first-year LLC program introduced in 2004 that has since evolved into learning communities with a tightly integrated curriculum but no co-residential requirement. The building reflects a new emphasis by Marietta’s president, Joseph Bruno, on “the transition students face at the end of their college life ... [which] only a few American colleges have a program in place to support” (Bruno 2012).

Living-learning communities at independent colleges and universities are organized around many
themes. The University of Denver (CO) offers LLCs for first-year students in five areas—creativity and entrepreneurship, environmental sustainability, international understanding, social justice, and wellness—as well as a multi-year program in leadership that includes residential components in both the first and sophomore years and supports a 24-credit interdisciplinary minor in leadership studies. Baylor University offers two LLCs for upper-class students, one focuses on entrepreneurship and the other on outdoor living. The Outdoor Adventure Living and Learning Center includes a common course each semester as well as social and pre-professional activities related to outdoor activities (Dunn and Dean 2013, 14–15). Academically, it serves as an entry point to the major in recreation and leisure services. It also is intended to address “social, service, leadership and spiritual aspects of a student’s life” by offering physical challenges and teaching life skills.

Calvin College (MI) offers a living-learning community for upper-class students that combines outdoor adventure with environmental stewardship, defined as “creation care” in keeping with the institution’s faith-based heritage and mission. It includes a common class on wilderness skills and a weekly group dinner. Many institutions have residential communities centered around language study, but the Jordan Family Language House at Austin College (TX) is notable for offering immersive instruction in five languages (to separate groups of students) under one roof. Millikin University (IL) has a multi-year living-learning community exclusively for nursing students. Agnes Scott College (GA) and Cedar Crest College (PA), both women’s colleges, have living-learning communities specifically designed to promote the success of women in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM). Indeed, although research suggests that LLCs can be especially effective in attracting and retaining women in STEM majors, independent colleges and universities have not been as active as larger public institutions in developing living-learning programs in this area (Inkelas 2011).

Finally, many independent colleges and universities also offer themed residential halls that bring together students with shared academic or social interests. On most campuses, the focus of these communities is predefined by administrators, perhaps in consultation with faculty and student representatives, and they may remain located in the same residential spaces for years or even decades (for example, some foreign language houses). Themed residential halls emphasize “structured socializing opportunities,” as the website of Augustana College (IL) describes them, but may be integrated formally with the curriculum through common courses and faculty advisors. On other campuses, however, students compete for small residential spaces by submitting proposals for organizing themes to committees of faculty members and student affairs staff. The themes may run the gamut; at Roger Williams University (RI), recent themes included “Eco Geeks and Freaks of Nature” (sharing an interest in animal and environmental issues), “We Fit” (personal wellness), and “Skin We’re In” (diversity issues).

Some living-learning communities at independent colleges and universities have been developed for students with distinctive characteristics who may need additional support in the transition to college life. The First in the Family Community at Pacific Lutheran University (CA) is designed for first-generation students as a residential option. The 30 students have a resident director from the student affairs staff and two resident assistants, along with additional access to academic support and advising. The cohort also is enrolled in a common academic course, Psychology 113: Care and Education Planning, which helps the students “identify their values, interests, personal styles, and skills to discover majors and careers that they would find fulfilling.” The students participate in social activities designed to introduce them to the campus and the community and to build a strong peer support network, which research shows has a positive effect on first-generation student retention. The students also visit local high
schools, where the First in the Family Community is used to recruit future first-generation students. Several of the exemplary institutional efforts to retain first-generation college students supported by the CIC/Walmart College Success Awards program incorporated living-learning communities similar to Pacific Lutheran’s (Strand 2013), but learning communities without a residential component seem to be a more common support strategy for first-generation students, many of whom are adult or commuter students.

One of the most distinctive populations for a living-learning community is the commuting students who enroll at Cabrini College (PA), which is located in the Philadelphia suburbs. As the college website explains, a living-learning community “for commuter students sounds impossible, but Cabrini Cruisers is designed specifically for commuting first-year students to explore their talents and develop leadership skills.” Although the students do not technically reside together, the program explicitly echoes all the elements of a successful living-learning community: an integrated curriculum of several common classes, a core group of faculty and staff advisors, two specially-trained “master learners” (upper-class students who usually live in the residence halls and serve as peer mentors), on-campus social activities, off-campus learning opportunities with other commuter students in the cohort, and a dedicated liaison to the Center for Student Engagement and Leadership. From an administrative perspective, Cabrini Cruisers is treated the same as the other seven LLCs on campus, under the direction of the director of the First-Year Experience and with the guidance of a Living and Learning Community Council involving faculty members, staff, and students. The success of all the living-learning communities at Cabrini has been supported by the development since 2007 of “an explicit, interconnected relationship” between four key offices at the institution: enrollment management, admissions, marketing and communications, and the first-year experience office (Gebauer et al., 2013, 2). Another factor in the success of the living-learning programs at Cabrini has been active recruitment and professional development for faculty members who teach the interdisciplinary courses integrated within each community. The impact of all the LLCs at Cabrini has been a 12 percent increase in first-year student retention between 2008 and 2013 and “a sense of confidence that … while hard to measure, is enacted across campus, through daily interactions with faculty, staff, and fellow students, from semester to semester” (Gebauer et al., 2013, 9).

To return to the first institutional example introduced in this report, St. Lawrence University may offer a conventional residential setting for its first-year living-learning communities, but it also takes full advantage of its geographic location to offer a unique residential setting for an intensive semester-long program devoted to interdisciplinary environmental studies: a yurt village called Arcadia in the middle of the 6 million-acre Adirondack State Park (York 2007; Spear et al. 2003, 33–34). Every fall, a dozen students and three members of the program staff live together for 16 weeks in this wilderness setting off the grid; additional faculty members stay two nights a week at the site. The students enroll in a full load of courses, often taught outdoors in half-day sessions, including the Natural History of the Adirondacks, Creative Expressions of Nature, and Land-Use Change in the Adirondacks, plus woodworking classes and field excursions. The program’s website promises that “since all students take the same courses, talking about what you are learning in them [becomes] as natural as talking about the weather.” Students also are encouraged to practice sustainability in a “materially simple, close-knit community,” sharing daily chores and unplugging from digital technologies. The goal of the Adirondack Semester is “to enable students to study nature and human relationships with nature through academic classes enriched by direct experience.” This is an extreme example of “curricular and co-curricular learning within a living environment” (Conte 2015, 93), but in 2014 the website Complex.com named Arcadia one of the “coolest dorms in America.”
Questions to Consider

The leaders of independent colleges and universities may want to consider the following questions about designing and sustaining residential learning communities:

- Merrily Dunn and Laura Dean (2013) provide a list of questions to help plan new living-learning communities that are equally useful to reconsider existing programs: “Will the program be managed by student affairs or academic affairs? How will the intersection with student affairs, particularly student housing, be structured and sustained? What role will faculty members play? What role will student affairs/housing play? Who will be responsible for programmatic and staffing functions? How will communication be structured to ensure effectiveness? What is the funding source? What does the reporting structure, both academic and residential, look like? Finally, how will the outcomes be assessed?”

- How clearly can the institution define a role and expected outcomes for living-learning communities on campus? How do (or could) living-learning communities “fit within [the] institution’s mission, structures, processes, culture, and climate” (Taylor et al. 2003, 9)?

- Are formal living-learning communities necessary at small colleges and universities where many students may already live in campus housing? When Mount Holyoke College (MA), a women’s college with a distinguished record of residential education, introduced a pilot program of LLCs in 2014, the dean of students alluded to the competition between smaller private institutions and “larger schools [that] have been doing this for a long time because they want to emulate communities like ours. ... We’re creating a smaller area within the community so that it will be even more intimate” (Mount Holyoke College 2014). Can the introduction (or expansion) of living-learning communities make independent colleges and universities a more attractive option for students who are interested in a traditional residential college experience? Or can living-learning communities make such institutions seem too elitist to some potential students and their families?

- What is the best curricular structure for living-learning communities on a given campus? Should the living-learning communities include clustered courses, team-taught courses, an immersive residential experience, or other approaches? Each approach calls for “varying degrees of student and faculty engagement and curricular integration” (Laufgraben 2005) and requires different amounts of faculty coordination and support.

- As Penven and associates (2013) note, living-learning communities should provide an “infrastructure for substantial collaboration between academic and student affairs ... [which] can be a powerful pedagogical tool.” How can faculty members
and student affairs staff collaborate most effectively—or be encouraged to collaborate—on living-learning communities? What can senior academic leaders do to encourage and recognize effective living-learning communities and to reward the faculty and staff members who contribute to the effectiveness of these communities on campus?

- How many students can be accommodated in living-learning communities, given such constraining factors as student demographics, residency requirements, on-campus housing space, staffing, and support? How should students be selected for participation in living-learning communities? Should participation be voluntary?

- Are the residential buildings on campus appropriate for living-learning communities? Are they designed to encourage community interactions, with dedicated public spaces and, if desired, room for offices and residences for staff or faculty members? Some research suggests that the “current emphasis on suite or cluster design in residence halls,” which students tend to prefer to traditional dorms with long hallways in terms of personal living space and amenities, does not “necessarily [lead] to positive outcomes in terms of sense of community” (Devlin et al. 2008, 491). So, renovations or new construction designed to appeal to prospective students may be less conducive to living-learning communities once they enroll.
References

Note: All web links were working and accurate at the time of publication.


Suggestions for Further Reading

Aaron M. Brower and Karen K. Inkelas, “Living-Learning Programs: One High-Impact Educational Practice We Now Know a Lot About,” Liberal Education 96:2 (2010), 36–43, www.aacu.org/publications-research/periodicals/living-learning-programs-one-high-impact-educational-practice-we. This article includes a summary of the research on student outcomes associated with living-learning communities and a typology of 17 different kinds of living-learning programs, based largely on Inkelas’s work as director of the National Study of Living-Learning Programs in the 2000s. A more detailed version of the typology and a technical analysis of the research literature can be found in Karen K. Inkelas and Matthew Soldner, “Undergraduate Living-Learning Programs and Student Outcomes,” in John C. Smart and Michael B. Paulsen, ed., Higher Education: Handbook of Theory and Research no. 26 (New York, NY: Springer, 2011), 1–55. For more than a decade, Inkelas served as principal investigator of the National Study of Living-Learning Programs, a pioneering attempt to explore the structure and impact of living-learning communities.


Richard D. Gebauer and associates, “Beyond Improved Retention: Building Value-Added Success on a Broad Foundation.” Learning Communities Research and Practice 1:2 (2013), http://washingtoncenter.evergreen.edu/lcrpjournal/vol1/iss2/4. This article provides a detailed look at the development of living-learning communities for first-year students at one small independent institution, Cabrini College in Pennsylvania, with a focus on institutional structures, professional development, and gains in student outcomes.

The Washington Center for Improving Undergraduate Education at The Evergreen State College in Washington (http://evergreen.edu/washingtoncenter/resources/learningcommunities.html) is the national resource center for learning communities, with a wealth of research, planning, and evaluation materials related to residential and non-residential learning communities.
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High-Tech or High-Touch? 
Online Learning and Independent Higher Education

CIC Project on the 
Future of Independent Higher Education

February 2016
About the Project on the Future of Independent Higher Education

CIC’s Project on the Future of Independent Higher Education is a multi-year initiative to identify and examine the forces that are most likely to affect the future of independent colleges and universities and to help member institutions prepare for both new challenges and new opportunities. With the guidance of a steering committee of college and university presidents (see page 21), the project considers potentially disruptive changes to American society and education and explores fresh approaches to higher education and new college business models. The project also examines the distinctive characteristics and missions of independent colleges that have enabled them to offer a high-quality education for so many years. The project is supported by the Lumina Foundation for Education and the TIAA-CREF Institute.

Other Reports in This Series

This Research Brief is the fifth in a series of short papers on innovations in pedagogy and curriculum that may enhance student learning at independent colleges and universities. Each brief includes a review of recent literature, examples of how the innovation has been adopted by CIC members, discussion questions for further exploration, and recommendations for additional reading. The principal author is Philip M. Katz, CIC’s director of projects.

Research Brief 1: Competency-Based Education (April 2015)
Research Brief 2: Interdisciplinary Undergraduate Education (May 2015)
Research Brief 3: Career Preparation and the Liberal Arts (July 2015)
Research Brief 4: Living-Learning Communities and Independent Higher Education (October 2015)

Research Briefs and other CIC research reports on the future of independent higher education can be downloaded from www.cic.edu/ResearchFuture.

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The Council of Independent Colleges is an association of 765 nonprofit independent colleges and universities and higher education affiliates and organizations that has worked since 1956 to support college and university leadership, advance institutional excellence, and enhance public understanding of private higher education’s contributions to society. CIC is the major national organization that focuses on providing services to leaders of independent colleges and universities as well as conferences, seminars, and other programs that help institutions improve educational quality, administrative and financial performance, and institutional visibility. CIC conducts the largest annual conferences of college and university presidents and of chief academic officers. CIC also provides support to state fundraising associations that organize programs and generate contributions for private colleges and universities. The Council is headquartered at One Dupont Circle in Washington, DC. For more information, visit www.cic.edu
High-Tech or High-Touch? Online Learning and Independent Higher Education

KEY POINTS:

- Independent colleges and universities are cautious adopters of online education for undergraduate students. These institutions seek to balance a tradition of student-focused pedagogy in face-to-face settings and faculty wariness of online courses against the promise of lower instructional costs, changing student expectations, and the potential for better student learning outcomes.

- Research shows that online learning can be at least as effective as traditional classroom instruction, but many faculty members remain skeptical about the quality of online courses. The gap between faculty members and academic leaders with regard to perceived quality represents a significant barrier to broader adoption of online education.

- Although online education may have the potential to reduce instructional costs at the undergraduate level, the evidence that it actually does remains inconclusive. The development of online courses often requires a greater investment of time and resources than the development of traditional courses. For smaller independent institutions committed to relatively low student-faculty ratios, cost savings from online education are more likely to materialize after courses are offered multiple times or when institutions share online courses.

- Barriers to the adoption of online education at independent colleges and universities include uncertain cost models, concerns about decreasing the ranks of full-time faculty members and outsourcing instruction, and the high cost of supporting and maintaining a sophisticated technology infrastructure and instructional platforms.
Introduction

Online learning is an amorphous phenomenon, comprising technologies, pedagogies, and institutional structures that are both well established and rapidly emerging. Online learning has been described as both benign and threatening—either a simple application of new tools to evolving yet familiar methods of teaching and learning or a disruptive force with the potential to level the landscape of higher education so thoroughly that just a handful of traditional colleges and universities around the world will survive the 21st century (Leckart 2012). For independent colleges and universities that focus on undergraduate education, the potential impact of online learning falls between these two extremes, and probably closer to the benign end of the spectrum, especially for institutions that are able “to adapt and take risks...and rethink the learning environment and utilize digital tools to enhance the place-based education [they] offer” (Long 2015; also see Scholz 2013, Kim 2015).

William G. Bowen, former president of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and a leading optimist about the future of higher education in the digital age, stipulates that any “attempt to estimate the current extent of online learning, or to enumerate its near-limitless forms, would be foolhardy” (Bowen 2013a, 2). Instead, this brief will provide a glossary of key concepts and a brief overview of the current state of online learning before turning to three questions: Is online education high-quality education? Can online education help traditional institutions reduce instructional costs without sacrificing educational quality? And what are the barriers to incorporating online education into the undergraduate curriculum at independent colleges and universities?

Definitions

“Online education” encompasses many ways that digital technology can be applied to teaching and learning, ranging from the integration of web-based content, research activities, and learning management software into courses that still rely primarily on face-to-face instruction in a traditional classroom setting, to massive courses enrolling thousands of students from around the world who have little contact with a faculty member, to web-based tutorials that provide on-demand learning experiences and evaluation without an instructor at all. Each application raises somewhat different issues of pedagogy, management, and cost per student, not all of which can be addressed in this report.

This research brief is concerned primarily with credit-bearing undergraduate courses that are entirely or partly delivered online. The umbrella terms “online education” and “online learning” will be used interchangeably in this brief, and other terms will be used when more specificity is required.

This is a glossary* of key terms in the current national discussion about online education:

Adaptive learning: Adaptive learning systems modify the level and sequencing of instructional objects in response to student performance on tasks and quizzes, providing a more personalized learning experience.

Digital humanities: Includes research practices and methods, pedagogies, and presentation methods that incorporate digital tools into the humanities disciplines.

Flipped courses: Courses in which students are expected to acquire subject content outside of class meetings while in-class time is spent on deepening understanding through discussions, problem solving, and interactive engagement with the subject content. If the subject content is delivered online and face-to-face time in the classroom is reduced, these courses can be called hybrid courses.

Hybrid courses: Courses in which some of the instruction is delivered online, such as lectures on the subject content, and some instruction is

*Adapted from a glossary prepared by the staff of Ithaka S+R for CIC’s Consortium for Online Humanities Instruction.
provided in class, usually focused on more interactive activities and discussions.

**Learning analytics**: Learning analytics “is the measurement, collection, analysis, and reporting of data about learners and their contexts, for purposes of understanding and optimizing learning and the environments in which it occurs” (TEKRI n.d.). One area of focus is using data generated by online learning platforms to understand better how students learn and to develop more effective pedagogical methods based on that enhanced understanding.

**Massive open online course (MOOC)**: An online course that a) has start and end dates; b) is free to students, at least for those who are not seeking a certification, and open to anyone; and c) uses social media and automated grading technologies to enroll large numbers of students. Permutations include synchronous massive online course (SMOC) and distributed open collaborative course (DOCC).

**Online learning**: Instruction that is delivered over the internet instead of in a traditional classroom. It includes delivery of course content—for example, through online video lectures or asynchronous discussion boards—as well as more interactive technologies focused on problem solving or skills practice. Basic uses of a learning management system such as posting a course syllabus and assignments for a classroom-based course are not typically considered “online learning.”

**Open educational resources (OER)**: This term is frequently used to describe online educational content or tools that are free to end-users (who may be students) and use open copyright licenses that allow for reuse and repurposing by other instructors.

**Personalized learning**: Personalized learning involves creating an online (or offline) environment suited to the needs and preferences of an individual; for example, this could mean tailoring topics that illustrate common concepts to different student interests. See adaptive learning.

**Synchronous vs. asynchronous**: Synchronous components of a course are those in which all students in a course participate together at a specific time. Asynchronous components are available to students at any time or within a given window of time.

**Snapshot of the Online Education Landscape**

Online education continues to receive a tremendous amount of attention from the media, researchers and education reformers, public and private funders, and the academy. New statistics, survey results, technologies, and predictions about the future of online education appear almost weekly. What follows is a selective snapshot of online teaching and learning in American higher education at the start of 2016, highlighting where possible the differences between the independent sector of higher education and other kinds of institutions:

*Nearly every college and university incorporates digital technology into undergraduate instruction to some extent, from the ubiquitous use of learning management systems and online instructional resources to wholly online degree programs. Many institutions offer online undergraduate courses.*

- According to a 2013 survey conducted by The Learning House, Inc. in cooperation with CIC, nine out of ten CIC member institutions already offered at least one online or hybrid course. The majority of CIC member institutions relied on a learning management system to deliver digital content to some or all of their face-to-face courses. Finally, about half of CIC member institutions reported at least one fully online degree program at the undergraduate or graduate level; by comparison, more than 80 percent of public institutions offered at least
one fully online program that year (Clinefelter and Magda 2013).

- The survey results collected by Learning House, while rich in detail, may overstate the prevalence of online education in small independent colleges because of self-selection bias among the survey participants. The most recent data compiled by the U.S. Department of Education, which rely on a narrow definition of distance courses for credit, suggest a smaller but still impressive number of institutions engaged in online education, with 71 percent of all institutions and 65 percent of private baccalaureate institutions having some online course offerings in 2013. The smallest institutions, with enrollments of fewer than 1,000 students, were the least likely to offer online courses at just 47.5 percent (Allen and Seaman 2015, 9–11).

- About one-third of all faculty members have taught an online course for credit at some point in their careers and 40 percent have taught a hybrid course (Straumsheim, Jaschik, and Lederman 2015, 24).

Undergraduate enrollment in online courses is large and increasing.

- At least 5.25 million and perhaps as many as 7.13 million students take online courses from American colleges and universities each year. The different estimates stem from different definitions employed by the federal government and the industry-standard Babson Survey, which has been tracking online enrollments for more than a decade (Allen and Seaman 2015). The lack of a standard definition itself reflects the rapid growth and diversity of online education.

- The most recent federal data show that 32 percent of all degree-seeking undergraduate students take at least one online course for credit each year, and 6.5 percent are enrolled in fully online degree programs. At private four-year institutions, including both research universities and teaching-focused colleges, just 21.3 percent of students take at least one online course and 4.3 percent are enrolled in online degree programs (Snyder and Dillow 2015, Table 311.22).

- The number of students enrolled in online courses has risen steadily since 2003, but the rate of increase has slowed since 2012 (Allen and Seaman 2015, 12).

As a sector, independent colleges and universities are somewhat less likely than other kinds of higher education institutions to embrace online education.

- Independent institutions are less likely to offer online education than their public counterparts. They also tend to be later entrants into “a competitive marketplace where the for-profit and large universities dominate” (Hoey et al. 2014; also see Bichsel 2013).

- While 71 percent of chief academic officers (CAOs) across all sectors say that online learning is “critical” to the long-term success of their institutions, only 63.5 percent of CAOs from private nonprofit institutions concur. In 2014, 40.9 percent of private nonprofit institutions included the expansion of online learning as part of their formal strategic plans, slightly fewer than the 42.4 percent of public institutions that did so (Allen and Seaman 2015, 15).

- Presidents of independent colleges are much less likely than their public institution counterparts to view online offerings as a tool for boosting revenues, by a margin of 48 percent to 69 percent (Selingo 2015, Figure 5).

Students expect to have a digital component to their undergraduate education.

- Many observers have noted the changing patterns in digital consumption by today’s college students, who have lived all or most
of their lives in a world saturated by digital content, including the content they contribute to social media. Today’s students also are increasingly likely to rely on omnipresent smart phones and portable tablets or laptop computers than desktop computers. This fact has important implications for both pedagogy and campus infrastructure, as residential students now bring as many as seven internet-connected devices to campus for which they expect ubiquitous high-speed access which can severely strain the network bandwidth available for teaching (Smith 2015).

- “Even in the most traditional [private] colleges, 40–50 percent of students want more technology incorporated into their education, and 62 percent say they learn best in classes with some online components” (Oblinger and Grajek 2013, 2).

- Nonetheless, according to the 2014 Freshman Survey conducted by UCLA’s Cooperative Institutional Research Program, only 6.2 percent of first-year students at independent baccalaureate institutions say there is a “very good chance” they will take a fully online course as an undergraduate (Eagan et al. 2014, 45).

- Nontraditional students are more likely to enroll in online courses and programs than traditional undergraduate students (NCES 2015, Table 13). Traditional undergraduates are increasingly drawn to online higher education as a potential way to save money—which may mean a stark choice between an independent college and a public or for-profit provider of online education, or perhaps a combination of course credits from different types of educational institutions (Quillen 2015, Clinefelter and Aslanian 2015).

- The top three subject areas for MOOCs in 2015 by number of course offerings were business and management (17 percent), computer science and programming (17 percent), and the sciences (11 percent). Other representative subjects included the social sciences (just under 11 percent), education (9 percent), humanities (9 percent, down sharply from 17 percent in 2014), health and medicine (8 percent), and engineering (6 percent). For many years, the most popular MOOCs were introductory courses in computer science and statistics. Experts continue to “debate whether MOOCs can be as useful for teaching humanities and non-technical subjects as it is for computer science and math” (Shah 2015, Shah 2014; also see Wexler 2015).

- The survey of CIC institutions conducted by Learning House in 2013 found that the most common fields of study for undergraduate students enrolled in online degree programs (not courses) offered by these institutions were business, health-related professions, psychology/counseling, and criminal justice/paralegal studies (Clinefelter and Magda 2013, 22). In 2015, the top five majors for undergraduate students enrolled in online degree programs across all sectors of higher education were business administration, nursing, computer science and engineering, information technology, and engineering (Clinefelter and Aslanian 2015, 10).

- There are no reliable statistics for the distribution of flipped, hybrid, and online courses offered by discipline. In part, this is because many institutions do not distinguish among online, hybrid, and traditional courses for purposes of registration and transcripts (Clinefelter and Magda 2013, 11). A recent survey on flipped classrooms conducted by Faculty Focus, however, received

Online education is more common in some subject areas, especially business, other professional fields, and STEM disciplines, than others.
a disproportionate number of responses from college faculty members in the fields of health care, education, business and related disciplines, and the biological and biomedical sciences (Faculty Focus 2015, 14-15). This suggests a certain consistency in subject offerings across most modes of online instruction.

Finally, a note about MOOCs. Just a few years ago, MOOCs dominated the discussion about digital teaching and learning in higher education with a promise of expanded access to higher education at little or no cost to students. Coursera, Udacity, edX, 2U, and other MOOC providers aggressively sought students and partners in higher education. The New York Times declared 2012 “The Year of the MOOC,” but the hype soon began to ebb, even while the number of individuals enrolled in MOOCs continued to increase (Wexler 2015). Relatively few independent baccalaureate institutions pursued this path to online education, and the most recent Babson Survey reports that fewer than 14 percent of all higher education institutions have or plan to introduce MOOCs into their curricula (Green 2015b, 10; Scholz 2013; Allen and Seaman 2015).

**Student Outcomes**

One of the oldest and most important questions about online education is whether online education is or can be high-quality education. Do online students learn as much as or as well as they learn in traditional classroom settings? Do some students learn better using some modes of instruction than other students? Do some disciplines yield better results in online, hybrid, or face-to-face modes?

The general question was framed in the late 1990s as a debate about the “no significant difference phenomenon,” with a series of research studies over the subsequent decade that seemed to demonstrate that similar courses taught in the classroom and via distance learning led to comparable student learning outcomes. Many researchers, however, were dissatisfied with the methodologies used to support this conclusion (Nguyen 2015, Wu 2015). Then, in 2009, the U.S. Department of Education released an especially rigorous meta-analysis of existing research prepared by Barbara Means and a team of experts at SRI International. This study concluded that “students taking fully online courses performed marginally better than their counterparts in face-to-face sections” while students in hybrid sections performed best of all (Wu 2015, 4). The Means report was praised by researchers for its methodological rigor but also criticized for drawing upon too many courses in the fields of medicine and health care and a narrow range of institutional types (Lack 2013, 4–6). The most recent review of the extant research on student outcomes, conducted by an international team of leading scholars and published by the Gates Foundation in 2015, judiciously concludes that “distance [online] education, when properly planned, designed, and supported by the appropriate mix of technology and pedagogy, is equivalent to, or in certain scenarios more effective than, traditional face-to-face classroom instruction” (Siemens, Gašević, and Dawson 2015, 11).

Education researchers know that “the evidence is, by no means, conclusive” (Nguyen 2015, 316). The evidence of equivalent outcomes is strongest for studies that measure student mastery of content knowledge and discrete skills. For other outcomes, such as student engagement and building a sense of community among students, the evidence clearly suggests that online courses (especially courses that rely on asynchronous discussions) are not as effective as face-to-face courses (deNoyelles, Zydney, and Chen 2014). Measuring higher-level learning outcomes, such as abstract reasoning skills or the social and moral development of students, is especially complicated, and the evidence for the comparative effectiveness of online learning is much less compelling. More research is needed, including evaluations of upper-level humanities and social science courses that are not well represented in the literature (Wu 2015, 16; Lack 2013).
An increasing majority of CAOs across all sectors—74.1 percent in 2014, up from 57.2 percent in 2003—are convinced by the evidence that student learning outcomes from online education are at least as good as the outcomes achieved in traditional classrooms (Allen and Seaman 2015). Faculty members are far less certain. A 2015 survey conducted by Inside Higher Ed found that just 17 percent of all faculty members across all sectors agree or strongly agree with the statement that “for-credit online courses can achieve student learning outcomes that are at least equivalent to those of in-person courses [at any institution]” (Straumsheim, Jaschik, and Lederman 2015, 12). Unsurprisingly, faculty members who have actually taught online are more positive about the efficacy of online learning, with 28 percent agreeing that online courses can achieve equivalent student outcomes “at any institution” and 56 percent agreeing that student outcomes are equivalent “in the classes I teach” (Straumsheim, Jaschik, and Lederman 2015, 13–14). The skeptical views of faculty members and the gap in perceptions of quality between administrators and faculty members represent a significant barrier to the adoption or expansion of online learning, especially at smaller institutions (Banerjee 2011).

**Assessing Costs**

The second most important question about online education is, “What does it cost?” This question has at least three corollaries:

1) Can online education make money, and if so, do nonprofit colleges and universities enjoy the same market opportunities as for-profit educational providers?

2) Can online education save money or otherwise conserve limited resources?

3) Is it worth it? In slightly different terms, can traditional colleges and universities afford not to offer online education?

Answers to these questions are hindered by the inability of many institutions to establish the per-student and total costs of online learning. Indeed, one survey of chief financial officers found that nearly half of colleges with online programs could not tell whether the programs were generating net revenue or losing money; another 45 percent were considered profitable (Green and Wagner 2011).

Although more than 90 percent of CIC institutions use a centralized budget model to manage their online or hybrid offerings—that is, with all revenue returning to the central administration and all costs allocated through a regular budget process—this model does not guarantee that all costs will be accounted for (Clinesfelter and Magda 2013, 19).

Research shows that it typically takes more faculty time and institutional resources to develop and then teach an online course for the first time than a comparable face-to-face course, an additional cost that may not be captured in the budgeting process (Freeman 2015; Bowen 2013b, 51). Other “hidden” costs include technology upgrades, software licensing, IT support staff, and faculty training (Amirault 2012). Thus, Kenneth C. Green, founding director of the Campus Computing Project, which has tracked campus trends in education technology since 1990, argues for “a new candor about the true costs of developing online programs, which includes full cost accounting for the people and the institutional resources required to support online programs and online students” (Green 2015a, 51).

Some leaders of nonprofit colleges and universities continue to see online education as a potential “cash cow,” with optimistic predictions of enrollments and revenues (Amirault 2012, Bichsel 2013). Although public data about the institutional revenues or profits derived from online education are extremely hard to find, especially for independent institutions (Bacow et al. 2012, 9–10; Bowen 2013b, 82), most institutions seem to draw fairly modest net revenues from online education and then typically from online degree or certificate programs in professional disciplines rather than individual courses in the liberal arts.
The existing evidence is inclusive as to whether “online learning [can] bend the higher education cost curve” for individual institutions or the sector as a whole (Deming et al. 2015). More research is needed on “the cost implications of online and hybrid instruction.” As Derek Wu notes in his review of the recent student outcomes literature, “none of the studies...examine the effect of delivery formats on course costs, and yet several suggest that the potential cost reductions—or increases—associated with online and hybrid courses may be what ultimately drive the extent to which their results are actionable” (Wu 2015, 15).

Advocates of MOOCs predict that cost savings from online instruction, for institutions and individual students alike, ultimately will derive from scale. Yet the economically viable scale for MOOCs is likely to occur “beyond the number of learners that any instructor could possibly build individual relationships with, [which] is what distinguishes a [MOOC]...from a traditional residential, blended, or online course” (Kim 2015). Bowen and others argue that cost savings through online learning are possible at a smaller scale, for example: when hybrid and online courses are taught multiple times and perhaps by lower-cost instructors than the full professors who develop the original course materials; when online learning allows institutions to make more efficient use of faculty time and campus space (because online learning can take place at unusual hours and without physical classrooms); and when students take advantage of flexible scheduling to stay on track to complete degrees or even accelerate their time to degree (Bowen 2013b, 50–52; Cowen and Tabarrok 2014).

Another promising path to cost savings is collaboration, with “institutions creat[ing] online versions of their courses that can be traded with other institutions whose students have similar...aptitudes and preparation.” In this scenario, a student’s home institution can continue to set requirements and issue credits while the online courses attract a critical mass of students at a sustainable cost to the offering institutions. Potential savings would come from eliminating duplicate courses offered by different institutions and by increasing enrollments in upper-level courses that cannot attract a viable number of students from a single institution (Hoxby 2014, 532–533). CIC is piloting such collaboration through the Consortium for Online Humanities Instruction, a group of 21 independent colleges and universities developing and sharing upper-division online courses in the humanities. The preliminary evaluation by Ithaka S+R suggests that “any eventual economic benefits will derive from sharing of courses across the Consortium, not from instructor time savings in teaching them” (Griffiths, Brown, and Mulhern 2015, 8–9; also see Marcum and Samayoa 2015).

**Barriers to Online Education**

Uncertainties about the quality and cost structures of online education are the two most significant barriers to the adoption of online learning by independent colleges and universities. Other barriers include the recruitment and training of faculty members to teach online, the implementation and support of technology, and the perceived conflict between mission and high-tech learning that persists at many institutions. The 2013 Learning House survey of CIC member institutions identified a long list of barriers that independent institutions have encountered while developing online and hybrid course offerings (Clinefelter and Magda 2013, 13–14). At least two-thirds of the surveyed institutions encountered the following:

- Greater faculty time and effort required to teach online;
- Lack of acceptance of online instruction by faculty members;
- Students who require more self-discipline and institutional support to succeed in online courses;
- Online courses that cost more to develop than traditional courses; and
Concerns about the ownership of intellectual property (that is, whether faculty members, institutions, or perhaps some third party own the instructional materials used in online courses).

At least 20 percent of the surveyed institutions encountered difficulties with the following issues as well:

- Training and recruiting faculty to teach online;
- Meeting the demands for off-hour services;
- Verifying student identities;
- Measuring outcomes;
- Retaining students;
- Maintaining the learning management system and related technology;
- Providing access to campus services such as the library and registrar;
- Identifying students in need of special services; and
- Providing special services to students in need.

Many analysts focus on barriers to the adoption of online learning that stem from the perceptions and concerns of faculty members. In fact, some faculty members are skeptical about online education simply because they are unfamiliar with it (Bacow et al. 2012, 20; Banerjee 2011, 9–10; Liu and Tourtellott 2011). Other faculty members “fear that online instruction will be used to diminish faculty ranks” by automating some aspects of traditional classroom teaching, replacing full-time faculty members with per-course instructors teaching from standardized instructional materials, or substituting online courses taught elsewhere for courses taught by an institution’s existing faculty. The actual impact of online learning on the changing composition of the academic workforce, however, is far from settled (Bacow et al. 2012, 20; Wheeler 2014; Barnshaw and Dunietz 2015, 13–15).

Many faculty members understand that developing online courses typically requires more time than developing traditional courses. According to a recent survey, most faculty members also are concerned about the lack of technical and other support for online learning at their institutions (Straumsheim, Jaschik, and Lederman 2015, 7). As a result, faculty members may need additional incentives to commit themselves to online instruction—especially at independent baccalaureate institutions, which are less likely than their public counterparts to recognize and reward the use of information technology as a formal part of the faculty review and promotion process (Green 2015, 49–50).

Most modes of online education require a robust IT infrastructure and on-demand technical support for faculty and students, preferably around the clock. The lack of technology resources and faculty support is especially challenging at smaller institutions. As Gouri Banerjee notes in her study of the introduction of hybrid learning at Emmanuel College (MA), “the rapid pace at which new technologies become available is overwhelming. With the greater focus on teaching, smaller departments, limited staff and resources at many smaller institutions, keeping up with online technologies/pedagogies [is] daunting” (Banerjee 2011, 11; also see Long et al. 2009). This concern is not limited to small institutions, however; the top priorities for information technology administrators across all campus types are assisting faculty to integrate IT into instruction, hiring/identifying qualified IT staff, and providing adequate user support (Green 2015, 46).

Finally, the student-focused mission of small independent colleges and universities can itself be a barrier to the adoption of online learning. Many of “these institutions are concerned that they will devalue their traditional, residential education if they move instruction online [and] they are sensitive to criticism from parents and students who believe that the high tuition and fees they are currently paying entitle students to regular, frequent, direct, face-to-face contact with faculty” (Bacow et al. 2012, 9; also see Scholz 2013). Some small colleges are reluctant, too, to adopt approaches to online instruction developed by or associated with large or even for-
profit institutions (Liu and Tourtellott 2010, 59). As the lead technology reporter for Inside Higher Ed notes, “the [relatively] low interest in online education isn’t always motivated by hostility; some of the smallest institutions simply see it as irreconcilable with their mission statements” (Straumsheim 2014; also see Kim 2015).

Examples of Innovations in Online Education at Independent Colleges and Universities

CIC member institutions rely on a variety of innovative strategies to incorporate online learning into the undergraduate curriculum.*

Some institutions have focused on integrating technology throughout the campus and the curriculum, relying on both specialized learning management systems developed for the higher education market and other technologies developed for the consumer market. For example, in 2011 Lynn University (FL) began to provide iPad tablet computers to each of its faculty members and then to graduate students and undergraduate students enrolled in both residential and online degree programs. The goals were to help faculty members and students prepare for a world and workplace saturated by mobile devices, to save money by standardizing the software used on campus, and to replace expensive textbooks with digital course materials (Fuhrman 2014). The most significant implementation costs involve technology (including wireless connectivity on campus) and training both faculty and students to use the new learning tools. Lynn takes advantage of Apple’s integrated software and hardware systems and the expertise of its own faculty members to develop course content for iTunes U and the iBook platform, saving students between 44 and 93 percent on traditional textbook costs and keeping undergraduate tuition increases in check (Meyer 2014).

Lynn University claims that it has “transformed the classroom from a physical place to a state of mind,” and indeed adult students now have the option of completing bachelor’s degrees entirely or mostly online though a program called iLynn introduced in 2015. But for most of the traditional undergraduate students at the Boca Raton campus, learning takes place in actual classrooms with low student-faculty ratios and includes a core curriculum of interdisciplinary seminars. In this case, digital content and flipped classrooms support high-touch undergraduate instruction. Inspired by Lynn’s successful model, Maryville University (MO) introduced an online learning initiative featuring preloaded iPads in 2015; this initiative was preceded by an intensive professional development program for faculty members (Schaffhauser 2015). In a similar initiative, Moravian College (PA) launched a $2.4 million upgrade to its wireless infrastructure to support iPads and other mobile devices on campus, followed by a pilot program of hybrid courses to build faculty support. According to Moravian president Byron Grigsby, “technology is just like any of the other liberal arts skills that we want to provide our students” (Straumsheim 2015a). Several other independent colleges also have experimented in providing each student with a laptop or tablet computer (BestColleges.com n.d.).

Many institutions have developed relatively small and specialized online programs for adult and professional students—such as the online recertification program for teachers at Converse College (SC) or the executive master’s degree in communications innovation at Ithaca College (NY)—but few if any online offerings for undergraduate students. Other independent colleges and universities, such as Champlain College (VT) and Southern New Hampshire University, have developed extensive and innovative online programs that co-exist with traditional residential liberal arts programs but are run as separate divisions.

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*Except where noted elsewhere, the descriptions of academic programs in this section are based on information from the institutions’ public websites.
Champlain, for example, has a residential campus with about 2,000 traditional-age students and a core curriculum featuring small, interdisciplinary courses that focus on the individual and the community, the Western tradition, and globalization. Champlain also has a continuing education division with 1,000 online students and partnerships with more than 50 corporations and government agencies, ranging from Ben & Jerry’s to the federal government’s Office of Personnel Management, for which the college provides skills-based online courses and certificate programs on a subscription pricing model (Straumsheim 2015b).

In the mid-1990s, Saint Leo University (FL) was another small independent college serving mostly traditional students, but with a modest continuing education program and a niche market of degree programs on U.S. military bases. A new president, Arthur Kirk, saw online education as an opportunity for expansion and committed $600,000 to a course development initiative. Saint Leo offered its first online courses in 1998, “when there was little competition beyond the University of Phoenix” (Kirk 2010, 32). By 2010, online education was generating $56 million a year in tuition and fees (Kirk 2010, 31). By 2014, Saint Leo continued to enroll about 2,300 students at its historic residential campus—plus another 14,000 enrolled wholly or partly online through its Center for Online Learning and a network of education centers across the South. It is “one of the nation’s leading providers of higher education for active duty military and veterans.”

According to Kirk, several factors have contributed to this success, starting with a strong institutional commitment and an adequate initial investment. Saint Leo adopted (and maintains) a highly structured course development process that brings together faculty members, instructional designers, and experts in adult learning. The result is standardized course content that can be taught with great consistency yet limits the autonomy of individual instructors. This is combined with a highly flexible approach to course delivery that offers different student populations different mixes of online and face-to-face instruction according to their needs, from wholly online programs for adult learners to low-residency professional programs to traditional residential undergraduate programs that incorporate many of the innovations in instructional technology developed for other programs. Kirk also recognizes the tremendous advantage that Saint Leo continues to enjoy as an early adopter, and he counsels other independent colleges:

> It is highly unlikely you can ever match even our modest (compared to the for-profits) totals.... But you need online courses and online programs. Traditional and non-traditional students increasingly demand—and often require—them. The time may have passed for the ‘big growth’ strategy, but if you want to protect what you have and hopefully grow it, you need to be online, now! (Kirk 2010; also see CIC 2014).

As if in response to Kirk’s advice, some smaller institutions with distinctive missions have explored distinctive ways to offer online education. Shimer College (IL) is a very small institution, enrolling fewer than 150 students, and has a Great Books curriculum based entirely on primary sources and Socratic dialogue. A new strategic plan introduced in 2014 called for adding an online component to the curriculum. Faculty members were skeptical about applying the Socratic approach to an online environment, so Shimer began with an experimental pilot course for alumni that incorporated synchronous discussions and tools that allow students to share annotations to common texts. The ultimate goal is to convert half the core curriculum into online offerings “in a variety of forms over time, as periodic discussions among alumni, as continuing education and enrichment for wider audiences, as model classes for prospective students or donors, and as for-credit undergraduate courses” (Patterson 2014; also see Straumsheim 2014). Campbellsville University (KY) is a Baptist institution that offers several successful online degree programs at the associate’s, bachelor’s,
and master’s levels, with particular strengths in theology, pastoral care, business, and education. Campus leaders were concerned, however, that distance learning students did not have “access to the same spiritual growth opportunities the main campus students have,” so they developed the nation’s first virtual chapel for online students as an extension of the face-to-face co-curriculum (Kich 2014).

Recognizing that faculty resistance is often the most significant barrier to the adoption of online learning, especially for instructors in the undergraduate curriculum, a number of CIC member institutions have focused particular attention on faculty development initiatives. Baldwin Wallace University (OH), for example, was another early adopter of online learning among independent liberal arts institutions, introducing hybrid courses for some adult students in 2002 (Martyn 2003). The first instructors were volunteers who recommended more formal professional development and dedicated faculty support for any future online courses. In response, the university sought external grant support to develop a Faculty Learning Community, which initially included eight faculty members. The group met every two weeks for a full academic year to discuss course redesign and teaching strategies, technology options, and institutional priorities for online learning; the discussions about priorities were especially important for building faculty support by reconfirming that hybrid courses with an experiential component were a good curricular fit for the institution. Faculty participants received a stipend and the staff support of a group facilitator and an instructional technology professional (Long et al. 2009).

The Faculty Learning Community at Baldwin Wallace helped establish best practices and evaluation guidelines for future courses. It also developed a core of faculty advocates who provided peer mentoring and support for the steady expansion of online learning at the institution from a few hybrid courses during summer terms to fully online courses during the regular academic year. Support for online teaching was subsequently incorporated into other professional development opportunities for faculty members. Connecticut College, a recent adopter of online learning, introduced a similar initiative in 2014 called the Technology Fellows Program, with the same goal of building a core of faculty experts and peer advocates. Participants engage in a three-semester pilot program to explore new pedagogies, develop and offer hybrid courses, and evaluate the student learning outcomes. According to one participant in the program, the “combination of workshops and seminars is resulting in a sustained conversation about the role(s) of digital technology in teaching and learning” while “offering an institutional model in terms of [the program’s] support for faculty innovation in teaching” (McCullough 2015).

Finally, a number of independent colleges and universities have identified collaborations with one, a few, or many other institutions as a way to share the benefits and costs of online education in the liberal arts. As part of CIC’s Consortium for Online Humanities Instruction, Connecticut College and Trinity College (CT) are working to address the dilemma of foreign language instruction in small colleges. In the past, both institutions have strained their resources to offer robust Russian language programs with only two full-time faculty members at each institution and few Russian majors. The potential solution, now being piloted, is a coordinated program of mid- and upper-level courses offered by faculty members at one or both institutions and open to students from both institutions via a combination of videoconferencing and asynchronous communication tools (Marcum and Samayoa 2015, 11). Bridgewater College (VA) and eight other independent colleges and universities in Virginia are using video and audio conferencing systems to pool their students and teaching resources to sustain courses in Mandarin, Arabic, and German, for which there is insufficient demand on any one campus (Graham 2015). The Associated Colleges of the South has supported experiments in blended
learning on individual campuses and within small consortia of independent institutions for more than a decade, in subject areas ranging from the classics to career planning, many of which have been documented in case studies to highlight best practices (Hagood and Pang 2014).

At a larger scale, the Online Consortium of Independent Colleges and Universities (OCICU) (www.ocicu.org) is a “virtual academic consortium in which member institutions collaborate in sharing online, credit-bearing courses and programs.” Institutions pay a flat fee to join OCICU, which gives their students access to hundreds of fully online courses developed by other member institutions, and a fee per enrolled student that is passed to the offering institution. The latter fee is typically less than what the home institution charges the student and more than the marginal cost to the offering institution of an extra student. The Consortium is managed by Regis University (CO), which handles most of the registration and coordination tasks.

Sunoikisis (http://wp.chs.harvard.edu/sunoikisis) is a national consortium of classics programs from nearly 100 colleges and universities, including many CIC member institutions. Founded in 1999 and supported by Harvard University’s Center for Hellenic Studies, the goal of Sunoikisis is “to supplement small or under-resourced classics programs with classes and lectures that a one- or two-person department might not be able to offer under typical circumstances.” To that end it develops digital teaching materials and online courses that students may take for credit under the guidance of faculty members at their home institutions.

Independent colleges and universities will continue to innovate in the field of online learning, but the most sustainable innovations will necessarily balance new approaches and the “focus on small classroom sizes and face-to-face time with students” that has traditionally characterized such institutions. Brian Rellinger, chief information officer at Ohio Wesleyan University, argues that “using technology strategically can benefit a small, liberal arts college without compromising our core values.” But he also advises that “sorting out the trends from the game changers is difficult, and sometimes impossible. Technology is not needed in every classroom or course, or by every faculty member. The correct approach is to evaluate and implement technology where it makes the most sense” (Rellinger 2013).
Questions to Consider

The leaders of independent colleges and universities may want to consider the following questions about the introduction or expansion, sustainability, and impact of online education at their institutions:

- Is online learning an institutional fit? “Fit” may include issues of mission, faculty support, and the identification of appropriate institutional resources for financing and risk management, technology infrastructure, faculty and student support services, and operating procedures that can accommodate online learners (Cook 2015).

- In an article designed primarily for college trustees, Green and Wagner (2011) offer six essential questions about online learning that make sense for any institutional stakeholder to ask: Why are we online? What will it cost (and who is going to pay for it)? How do we support faculty members and students in our online programs? What are the organizational arrangements for our online learning programs? How do we assess quality? Who owns the intellectual property of our online courses?

- Does online education make sense for some of an institution’s students—such as graduate, adult, or professional students who are less likely to expect a traditional residential college experience—but not for other students?

- What is the potential cost—to revenues, enrollments, or reputation—of not being online?

- Which learning technologies are right for the students at a given institution? George Siemens, a pioneer in the field of online education who helped create the first MOOC, offers a series of questions to help evaluate new education technologies (Siemens 2015). The goal is to assure that learning technologies remain student-centered and high-touch: Does the technology foster creativity and personal expression? Does the technology develop the learner and contribute to her formation as a person? Is the technology fun and engaging? Does the technology have the human teacher and/or peer learners at the center? Does the technology consider the whole learner?
References

Note: All web links were working and accurate at the time of publication.


Suggestions for Further Reading

Note: A more extensive bibliography of online learning with an emphasis on independent colleges and universities is available at www.cic.edu/OnlineEdBibliography.

Several writers offer useful frameworks for thinking about costs, financial risks, and other aspects of institutional planning for online education. These guides build from simple yet fundamental questions to more detailed questions in roughly the following order:


Vickie Cook, “Is Online Learning an Institutional Fit?,” The EvoLLLution (January 15, 2015), http://evolllution.com/opinions/online-learning-institutional-fit. The questions in this article fall into the categories of administration, teaching and learning, and student support services.


Deanna Marcum and Clara Samaya, Leveraging Technology for the Liberal Arts: The Council of Independent Colleges Consortium for Online Humanities Instruction (New York, NY: Ithaka S+R, 2015), www.sr.ithaka.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/SR_Case_Study_Leveraging_Technology_Liberal_Arts_CIC110515.pdf. This report by the managing director of Ithaka S+R includes a detailed discussion of the CIC Consortium, a collaborative effort by 21 independent colleges and universities to develop and share online courses in the humanities, and a more general discussion of online education at smaller liberal arts institutions.

Carl Straumsheim, Scott Jaschik, and Doug Lederman, The 2015 Inside Higher Ed Survey of Faculty Attitudes on Technology (Washington, DC: Inside Higher Ed and Gallup, Inc., 2015), www.insidehighered.com/booklet/2015-survey-faculty-attitudes-technology. While this survey demonstrates that many faculty members remain deeply skeptical about online learning, it also explores the multiple criteria that faculty members rely upon to evaluate the quality and effectiveness of online courses.
The OLC Quality Framework (http://onlinelearningconsortium.org/5-pillars) is a distillation of pioneering work begun in the late 1990s by the Sloan-C Consortium (now the Online Learning Consortium) to define effective online learning. The “5 Pillars” of this framework include access, learning effectiveness, faculty satisfaction, student satisfaction, and scale (cost effectiveness and institutional commitment). The OLC website includes a number of reports and case studies.

The Quality Matters Higher Education Rubric (www.qualitymatters.org/rubric) is a research-informed set of “eight general standards and 41 specific standards used to evaluate the design of online and blended courses.” The rubric was originally developed by the University System of Maryland with a grant from the federal Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education. Institutions that subscribe to Quality Matters receive access to extensive professional development opportunities and peer review of online courses.
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