

CASE STUDY

Leveraging Technology in the Liberal Arts

The Council of Independent Colleges Consortium for Online Humanities Instruction

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*Deanna Marcum
Clara Samayoa*





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Introduction

The Council of Independent Colleges (CIC), created in 1956, is a membership organization of nearly 700 independent, non-profit colleges and universities. The organization exists to support college and university leadership, advance institutional excellence, and enhance public understanding of private higher education's contributions to society. To achieve these goals, CIC hosts and develops programs, seminars, and conferences that help institutions improve the quality of education, administrative and financial performance, and institutional visibility.

Economic pressures have forced presidents of independent colleges to become more innovative in their curricular offerings and to look for ways to reduce costs, increase enrollments, or both.

The issues that the presidents of CIC colleges have in common are well articulated in CIC's July 15, 2015 report, *Mission-Driven Innovation: An Empirical Study of Adaptation and Change among Independent Colleges*.¹ Chief among them are the economic pressures on families as they confront tuition costs. Students and their families, particularly in this economic climate, are more focused on academic programs that are likely to be converted to well-paying jobs. Finally, there is increased competition for students among independent colleges and increasingly these institutions engage in aggressive tuition discounting. These economic pressures have forced presidents of independent colleges to become more innovative in their curricular offerings and to look for ways to reduce costs, increase enrollments, or both.

The humanities have been hit hard by these trends. As the number of humanities majors has declined, small colleges have struggled to maintain a robust humanities course catalog—and, in particular, a set of needed upper-level courses—for the majors that remain. The colleges face a Hobson's choice: offer courses that enroll only a handful of students, which is financially unsustainable, or cut the courses and make it more difficult for students to complete their requirements and graduate on-time.

¹ James C. Hearn and Jarrett B. Warshaw, *Mission-Driven Innovation: An Empirical Study of Adaptation and Change among Independent Colleges*. Washington, DC: The Council of Independent Colleges, July 2015.

While other case studies in Ithaca S+R's series on educational transformation chronicle institutional achievements, this case study highlights an idea and a strategy for collaboration. The results of the work will not be clearly established for a few more years, but we are interested in the collaborative process that 21 participating colleges in CIC have engaged in as they attempt to address the problem of upper-level humanities courses through technology. With funding from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, CIC set about creating a Consortium of its members who would support one another in the design of online, upper-level humanities courses that would be offered to students at all of the participating colleges. The Consortium was intended to further three goals:

- To provide an opportunity for CIC institutions to build their capacity for online humanities instruction and share their successes with other liberal arts colleges;
- To explore how online humanities instruction can improve student learning outcomes;
- To determine whether smaller, independent, liberal arts institutions can make more effective use of their instructional resources and reduce costs through online humanities instruction.

CIC engaged a team at Ithaca S+R to design and carry out an assessment of the program and its progress towards these three goals. In addition to discussing the preliminary student learning outcomes of that assessment, covering the first year of the Consortium, we take a closer look at the experiences of six participating institutions, focusing on two issues: how did individual faculty members experience preparing and teaching their online courses; and how do administrators believe that the project is contributing to change on their campus.

Both faculty and administrators expressed great satisfaction with the project in the first year. Several faculty who had not taught online courses before took great pleasure in successfully executing a course. Many were surprised by the extent to which online discussions were as successful, or even more successful, than face-to-face classroom discussions. For the independent colleges, this consortial approach to offering upper-level humanities courses holds considerable promise for increasing options for students while containing costs. For humanities students, this may be an effective way to access a large selection of courses without having to forego the benefits of the liberal arts college environment.

Origins and Operations

When massive open online courses (MOOCs) burst onto the scene, gaining much attention from educational journalists and private investors, CIC wondered what role, if any, these learning technologies might play in helping independent colleges meet these

challenges. Richard Ekman, president of CIC, thought members could benefit from a partnership with MOOC providers such as Coursera and edX, which would allow CIC members access to the courses they provided.

But, as he noted in an interview with Ithaka S+R in December 2014, Ekman soon realized that MOOCs did not solve the problems faced by small independent colleges.² They were not dealing with large, oversubscribed lecture courses, for which MOOCs could be beneficially substituted. A far more pressing problem for small colleges is a declining number of humanities majors, and the corresponding low enrollment in upper-level humanities courses. Such courses are not financially sustainable, but canceling them would delay graduation for humanities majors. With this realization, the idea for a project to help acquaint small, independent colleges with the world of online learning morphed into a project in which colleges would form a consortium for creating and re-using online and hybrid courses, thus sharing the burden of the under-enrollment.

To form the consortium, CIC had to identify, through a competitive process, 21 colleges interested in developing upper-level humanities courses in online and hybrid formats. These courses would be taught first to a college's own students and then made available to students of all members of the consortium in subsequent academic terms. Having these courses available would enable the participating colleges to offer more courses to their upper-level humanities students, help them meet their requirements more efficiently, and thus mitigate the problem of too-few upper level humanities courses being available to the humanities majors.

CIC received nearly 100 applications from academic teams made up of the chief academic officer and two faculty members. A selection team composed of CIC and Ithaka S+R staff reviewed the applications, looking for the projects that best matched the criteria for the program: institutional commitment to developing two intermediate or advanced undergraduate humanities courses that incorporate substantial online instruction; willingness to offer the courses to other institutions after they are offered on the local campus; and agreement to evaluate student outcomes and cost. The selection team also looked for a variety of course content and levels of experience with online learning. A critical factor in selecting institutions for participation was the strength of the president's letter indicating institutional support for the project.

² Rebecca J. Griffiths, *Does Online Learning Have a Role in Liberal Arts Colleges? An Interview with Council of Independent Colleges President Richard Ekman*. New York, NY: Ithaka S+R, Dec. 17, 2014, <http://www.sr.ithaka.org/publications/does-online-learning-have-a-role-in-liberal-arts-colleges/>.

The number of institutions applying for this program illustrated the wide interest in the development in online learning, as well as the trust the members have in CIC. CIC has an excellent track record for identifying programs of importance to the membership and for securing funding for projects that provide incentives to experiment with new approaches and pedagogical techniques.³ The Consortium for Online Humanities Instruction provides yet another opportunity for members to work together to solve a common problem.

From CIC's perspective, this project allows for experimenting with online learning and providing an infrastructure that allows the group to learn together. Several faculty mentioned that as this is an experimental, grant-funded project, their more skeptical colleagues suspended judgment at least for a period of time. The project allows for gathering evidence that can be used to evaluate what students learned in the online courses and how faculty experienced planning and delivering the courses.

The project launched with a national workshop. It was especially helpful in giving faculty who were new to online teaching access to prominent national experts in online learning who offered useful advice about how to create successful online courses. CIC also mounted a project web site that includes tips and techniques specifically designed to help faculty new to online learning. The website also provides participants a discussion board to post questions and get help from their colleagues in real time.

As part of the project, Ithaka S+R was brought on to evaluate the results. Working with a small advisory group, Ithaka S+R staff created evaluation rubrics for the courses, and the staff of both Ithaka S+R and CIC also provided one-on-one consultations with faculty as they developed their course objectives and evaluation criteria. Many faculty observed that an unexpected outcome of the project was that they began to think more critically about the objectives and evaluation metrics for their face-to-face courses as well.

In addition to the initial national workshop, CIC and Ithaka S+R organized three regional workshops that allowed small groups of faculty and administrators to work with one another on problems they encountered in getting their courses launched. The small

³ For example, CIC has, with support from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, offered its member institutions the opportunity to be part of a Consortium on Digital Resources for Teaching and Research to improve teaching and learning, enhance faculty and student/faculty research, and streamline administrative capabilities through a uniform and cost-effective system. Each institution in the Consortium will identify at least one collection that could be made more valuable and used more frequently if it were stored and shared via a networked solution. The members of the Consortium will convene once each year for three years to share ideas, collections, research projects, and teaching strategies. A long-standing initiative in Information Literacy in the Disciplines brings together chief academic officers, faculty, and librarians to help institutions move beyond information literacy in general education to information fluency in humanities majors.

groups allowed participants to get to know one another and to develop informal networks that became a good source of advice and counsel over the first year of the project.

Finally, CIC provided the institutions with support for the creation of the courses by providing modest stipends to cover the extra time required in transforming their current courses and creating new ones.

In effect, CIC became a trusted neutral party with overall responsibility for coordinating the project. Deliverables, deadlines, and reporting obligations became important motivators for the selected participants. There was a strong interest in successfully contributing to the Consortium. Several participants observed that as The Andrew W Mellon Foundation would be looking at the results, they were eager to make their best contributions to the project. Both CIC and Ithaca S+R staff served as mentors, cheerleaders, problem solvers, and consultants throughout the first year, largely because of their commitment to the success of the project.

Evidence of Impact

One of the positive features of the project is that both qualitative and quantitative assessment have been built in from the outset. Ithaca S+R staff, charged with finding ways to measure results for the three goals established by the Consortium, worked with a small advisory group to determine the best ways to establish metrics in the three areas. Faculty in the Consortium made it clear that it was not enough to compare grades of online learners with grades of traditional learners. The group agreed on five types of evaluation data for looking at overall success of the Consortium:

- Instructor survey: Based on the Community of Inquiry survey instrument, which focuses on instructor presence, social presence, and cognitive presence;
- Instructor timesheets: Collected weekly to determine both course planning and design time and time spent in delivering the course;
- Student surveys: Administered for 32 courses to 209 students from both online and hybrid courses;
- Instructor scores on learning outcomes: Scores for 376 students on the learning objectives identified by each instructor for his/her own course
- Peer assessment scores: Scores on a four-point scale using a collaboratively developed rubric of two learning outcomes common to upper division humanities courses.

One year into the Consortium, each institution has developed two online or hybrid courses and delivered them once to their own students.⁴ Ithaca S+R has gathered and analyzed data on the results of these courses. The preliminary data gathered from these several sources were the subject of discussion at the August 2015 workshop for all Consortium participants.

The findings at the end of the first year suggest that the goal of building capacity was clearly met. In the spring semester, 41 online or hybrid courses were offered to students in the 21 colleges. Sixty-five percent of CIC Consortium courses had ten or fewer students, and nearly a quarter had fewer than six students. While some were online or hybrid versions of existing courses, 16 were entirely new courses. Nearly three-quarters of the instructors involved had little or no experience teaching online. In the Consortium, only one-third of the participants had significant prior experience of offering online courses to undergraduates.

Evidence of student learning is not as dramatic as capacity building, but for the most part, instructors believed that their students performed well in the online and hybrid courses. On a four-point scale, instructors gave their students an average of 3.17 on meeting learning objectives. Peer assessments of the student artifacts, however, earned an average score of 2.61. A rigorous comparison of the learning outcomes in online and hybrid courses versus traditional face-to-face courses was not possible because the assessment team did not have comparable data from traditional courses. Anecdotally, however, instructors believed that student learning in hybrid and online courses was about the same as learning in comparable face-to-face courses they had taught.

Students were almost evenly split in their views of how the hybrid and online courses compare: one-third rated them better, one-third rated them about the same, and one-third rated them worse. The most troubling result of the surveys is that both instructors and students expressed dissatisfaction with the level of social engagement and sense of community among students.

The third goal of increasing efficiency and reducing costs was not met in the first year, through there is every reason to believe that economic benefits will come as institutions begin to share courses with others in the Consortium. Many of the faculty had not taught an online course previously, and the learning curve for those faculty was steep. For the planning and design of online courses, about one-third of the faculty reported spending 30 hours or fewer; one-third reported between 30 and 80 hours; another one-third

⁴ Trinity College and Connecticut College are on an accelerated schedule: they already shared a course in Russian literature during the spring 2015 semester because sophomore Russian majors frequently go aboard during the fall semester.

reported more than 80 hours. Faculty reported spending, on average, fewer than 150 total hours on course delivery.

A Closer Look at Six Institutions

The overall assessments are valuable for understanding the benefits and the challenges of CIC Consortium, but we wanted to take a closer look at actual institutions and people. We selected five projects (encompassing six institutions), and interviewed participating faculty and administrators about the process and the results for faculty and students of those institutions. We made on-campus visits to Moravian College and McDaniel College, and we conducted telephone interviews for Otterbein, Trinity, Connecticut, and Concordia Colleges.

We found evidence that the Consortium has been valuable for its contributions to faculty development, introduction to new technologies and teaching tools, new pedagogical approaches, and new ways to deal with very small departmental enrollments.

In several cases, faculty of the college had resisted any experimentation with online learning, because they believed it was at odds with the mission and purpose of a liberal arts learning environment or because they found the notion of online learning a threat to the existing faculty. However, we found evidence that the Consortium has been valuable for its contributions to faculty development, introduction to new technologies and teaching tools, new pedagogical approaches, and new ways to deal with very small departmental enrollments. We also found that presidential leadership was critical in making the Consortium work a priority.

Faculty development

All of the faculty members with whom we spoke indicated that they could have developed an online course on their own, but probably would not have done so, given the press of other obligations and lack of infrastructure at their institutions. Many of those who taught in the program were new to teaching online courses, and they particularly valued

the opportunity to interact with other members of the Consortium as they learned together about how to teach online.

The two professors from Moravian College used the opportunity to teach online as a way of educating themselves about the process. They were keenly aware of the skepticism on their campus that anything short of direct interaction with students would hinder learning, and they wanted to learn for themselves how online teaching would affect student learning. One of the professors at Moravian College mentioned that he saw this course and the time that he invested in it as assets that he will be able to use for the next four and five years.

The two McDaniel College faculty members participating in CIC project were eager to learn how online courses could work for their term-time undergraduates, having previously taught online courses during the summer. Both professors felt that their students could be engaged through online interactions, that learning was as effective if not better than in their face-to-face courses, and that the experience helped them improve their instructional practice.

One of the participating professors received the Teacher of the Year award at McDaniel's commencement ceremony last May. She told us that she considered the award to be particularly meaningful because of her involvement in online teaching. She believes that the rest of the faculty took particular note of her award, and she sees this as an opportunity to engage her colleagues in discussions about the advantages and challenges of teaching online courses.

A professor at Otterbein College took delight in the ways in which the electronic format changed the dynamics of her class. She felt that the fresh electronic format generated a new enthusiasm among her students; "and not just for the students . . . I was learning along with them, for it was new to me, as well." She also noted how important the Consortium workshops had been in introducing her to new technologies, software, and pedagogical approaches.

Introduction to new technologies and teaching tools

One of the Moravian faculty members mentioned that participating in this program has allowed her to have a clearer vision of what she knows and does not know about online learning technologies. She was very excited about an application called *BlueJeans*, an online video conference program, which she had recently learned about and had tried out in her class. She said that the regional workshops hosted by CIC were responsible for her introduction to a wide variety of teaching tools that were, before then, unknown to

her. The other faculty member at Moravian College spoke fondly about how “Google Communities” revolutionized the way he taught.

One of the professors at Connecticut College noted that video conference and other communication tools were particularly interesting to use in the context of her Russian literature course, which was offered jointly with a professor from Trinity College. She noted that the technology facilitated authentic communicative interactions between students who don’t know one another, which increased their engagement with and mastery of the language.

A professor at Concordia College noted that the best thing about being part of CIC project is that in the workshops that brought participants together, he met many others who introduced him to new techniques and approaches that were extremely helpful. “They pushed me to try new things,” he said.

Closer relationships

The two Moravian faculty members were pleasantly surprised to learn that the intimacy that develops in the classroom could also be developed in an online course. One professor was impressed by the level of intimacy she experienced while leading a synchronous, online, religion class because individuals were joining the class from their homes, and pets and family members became part of the context for the course. She mentioned that she learned more about students she had taught previously through the online course than in the face-to-face courses.

Innovative solutions to low enrollments and small departments

A German professor at Concordia College was eager to participate in the project when he first learned of it, because it offered an opportunity to increase enrollment in his small department. His college is concerned about enrollment generally, so he knows that very small departments are vulnerable. He hoped that other colleges in similar situations would see the value of combining forces to keep foreign language instruction a viable part of the small college experience.

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Trinity College and Connecticut College formed a unique collaboration in the context of this project. These two institutions also tried to address the dilemma of foreign language instruction in small colleges. Faculty at both institutions had been strained in their attempt to cover high-quality, four-year Russian language programs with only two full-time Russian faculty in each institution and very few Russian majors. The two campuses, approximately one hour apart by car, are part of a library consortium but had not previously tried to collaborate on an academic program. They found the CIC project provided a wonderful opportunity to get to know each other and work together, especially since their course offerings were similar. For one course, two faculty, one from each institution, together developed and designed an upper-level Russian course.

Presidential leadership

In all six institutions, it was the interest of the president that explained the college's willingness to participate in the program. In some cases, the president was new, and experimenting with online learning fit into his/her plan to make greater use of technology.

The presidents were able to make use of an externally funded pilot project to test some assumptions and examine results. The new president of Moravian College greeted the announcement of CIC project with enthusiasm, as he had recently made the institution an "Apple campus." Having mandated that every student and faculty member be equipped with a Mac Book and an iPad, he saw this as an opportunity to further encourage faculty to use the technology to develop curricular innovation.

In some cases, the presidents simply decided that it was important for their institutions to participate, so they reached out to faculty likely to be interested and encouraged them to develop online or hybrid courses that could be put forward by their college. In other cases, presidents polled faculty to determine if they could find interested faculty who would help develop an institutional proposal.

Challenges

"It is an experiment" is the mantra of both CIC staff and the participants in the Consortium. For CIC, the project provided an opportunity for 21 independent colleges to experiment with online learning so that all of CIC members could learn more. For the participating institutions, the experimental nature of the program made it possible to test online learning without making a commitment to wholesale change. It was an opportunity to learn more before making decisions that had broad implications.

For the participating institutions, the experimental nature of the program made it possible to test online learning without making a commitment to wholesale change.

The project is funded for only two years. One of the important decisions that the group must now make concerns the ultimate fate of the Consortium. Up until now, the members have been able to ignore details that will need attention should the project continue. For example, the institutions agreed that no money would change hands while the project is ongoing, thereby simplifying many of the processes that will necessarily have to be addressed if the program extends. Since many of the presidents have embraced this project because they face enrollment pressures, and they hope that online courses will allow them to increase access to new students, they will be interested in finding ways to share revenue from course enrollments.

Furthermore, if the Consortium continues, it will face all the normal challenges that arise when several independent entities take collective action. Academic calendars are not synchronized— breaks come at different times—making it difficult for students in different schools to proceed through a course together. The colleges have their own rules pertaining to transfer credits from other institutions. The support mechanisms— libraries, IT organizations, and student services offices—vary greatly from one institution to another. The participating schools use a variety of learning management systems, and it would be quite difficult to coordinate the course offerings through a single system. For the time being, it is the student’s responsibility to learn to use the learning management system for each course. But the question looms: How can consortial students be assured of having equal access to resources to help them?

Expedient decisions have made it possible to carry out the experiment. Going forward, CIC will need to decide if it wishes to (or is able to) incorporate Consortium management into its portfolio of services. As one small example, CIC used some of the grant funds for the Consortium to build a web site meant to serve as a community space and resource for best practices and community advice to support the participants. Even though CIC invested considerable time and effort into building this web site, it has had limited value for the participants. While most faculty said they were interested in following posts to the site, relatively few faculty actually contributed to it. Faculty in small independent colleges have heavy teaching loads, and all are concerned about the pressure of time. Faculty who had received training on their own campuses in delivering online courses were better prepared than others for taking part in this project. CIC tried to equalize

faculty support by providing web-based resources, but it is still a challenge on many campuses. If the Consortium continues in the future, CIC will have to find better ways to support the members.

Governance of the Consortium, an issue that has been successfully sidestepped up until now, will become an important factor. Participating institutions have agreed for the period of the grant that all courses will be accessible to all students in the Consortium. This will undoubtedly become a problem in the long term if Consortium courses compete with locally-offered courses. All of the institutions are faced with enrollment challenges, and faculty will not be pleased to see prospective students on their campuses going elsewhere for courses. There are also concerns about quality control. Faculty in these institutions now have nearly complete control over the courses that are offered on their campuses. Can they be assured of having some say in which courses will be available to their students? Independent colleges take a lot of pride in the coherence and care of the curriculum, and losing control of the quality will almost certainly become a faculty issue.

While everyone has agreed temporarily to the principle of no money changing hands, issues such as tuition payments will soon emerge as important to the institutions offering the courses. The Consortium, if it continues, will have to develop a payment structure or some other form of reciprocity. New partners would undoubtedly want to participate, and membership criteria would need to be developed. In other words, a successful grant-funded project would have to be turned into a sustainable business operation, something that takes time and attention.

Conclusion

CIC, through the Mellon-funded Consortium for Online Humanities Instruction, provided an opportunity for its members to experiment with online learning. For reasons of economy and for reasons related to meeting students' expectations, colleges need to know more about what works and what does not. The Consortium became a ready-made testbed that came with modest faculty incentives to participate. CIC served as a broker and a facilitator for 21 institutions to see for themselves what is involved.

Many faculty found opportunities to try something new—to develop a course that they thought students would enjoy taking. The objective to create more courses for upper-level humanities students has been met admirably. If the Consortium develops, and if cost containment is to receive more attention, academic leaders will have to be more stringent about online courses being true replacements for required courses.

The Consortium has also provided a highly beneficial professional development opportunity for faculty. Most of the instructors who participated in the first year of the

program had little or no experience in online teaching. The Consortium has given them a reason to get involved. Faculty interviewed for this case study went into considerable detail about the concerns faculty on their campuses have about online learning, with many believing that the technology will replace the instructor. Faculty who developed online courses for this program realized that the instructor is still a vital part of the educational process, but they found the technology to be supportive of their roles. Many of them think that their experience with the Consortium can be used to ameliorate faculty concerns on their own campuses.

The Consortium has also provided a highly beneficial professional development opportunity for faculty.

Student engagement is one of the benefits faculty cite of working at a small, independent college. Faculty take great pride in the personalized attention their students receive. Early on, faculty who had not taught online or hybrid courses were concerned that student engagement would be diminished. After one semester's worth of experience, some faculty and some students remain concerned about this. While some faculty have found ways to build student engagement into online learning experiences, this topic continues to be a challenge.

The cost question has been most difficult to address. Faculty have been clear that they understand the need to contain costs, but they are not interested in being part of a program that reduces the number of instructors. This will continue to be a challenge, but administrators are increasingly determined to find ways to reduce the cost of a college education so that more students have access to higher learning. This CIC initiative has been enormously successful in introducing faculty to new ways of teaching and in giving students more options in their educational programs. The issue of cost has been part of the program from the beginning, and there is every reason to think that it will receive more creative attention as members of the Consortium take up questions about continuing as a group to share courses.

Appendix

List of Interviewees

Andrea Lanoux, Connecticut College

Stephen Grollman, Concordia College

Gretchen Krehling McKay, McDaniel College

Julia Jasken, McDaniel College

Jill Krebs, McDaniel College

Gordon Weil, Moravian College

Kelly Denton-Borhaug, Moravian College

Bernie Cantens, Moravian College

Margaret Koehler, Otterbein College

Katherine Lathi, Trinity College

Richard Ekman, Council of Independent Colleges

Barbara Hetrick, Council of Independent Colleges

Phil Katz, Council of Independent Colleges