

Colleges Work Together to Lower Costs and Expand Opportunities for Students

By Amy Bauman

Alone we can do so little; together we can do so much. —Helen Keller

When Lasell University (Massachusetts) president Michael Alexander attended the annual conference of the Council of Independent Colleges' (CIC) Presidents Institute in January 2015, he had no idea it was going to be one of *those* moments that in retrospect one sees as pivotal.

But it was.

For Alexander, some eighteen other college presidents and their institutions, countless students present and future, and for education itself, it was a moment when a slight twist of the lens brought new insight to addressing some of higher education's most-pressing issues. In particular, as Alexander and his colleagues would later write, this included the "challenge of maintaining the quality of educational offerings and broadening opportunity, while trying to lessen the impact of . . . increasing costs on current and prospective students."

Efforts born of that moment and the insight it fostered are generating inspiring work. Most notably, from conversations at the conference among that handful of liberal arts college presidents, a cohesive group aptly named the Lower Cost Models for Independent Colleges Consortium (LCMC) emerged. (See www.lcmc.info.)

The Birth of the Lower Cost Models for Independent Colleges Consortium

Thorny issues plague today's higher educational landscape, with affordability and accessibility topping the list and affecting all involved entities—from students to educators to institutions to our very culture. For liberal arts colleges, in particular, addressing those issues is central to their student-centered philosophy and to their continuing existence. "At Lasell, we had been working at reducing the cost of attendance while trying to provide quality education," Alexander recalled. "Before the CIC conference in January 2015, I had mentioned our discussion to several of my college president colleagues. Before the conference started, we met and talked about the issue. We decided then that we wanted to work together on it."

As the small group's discussion unfolded, enthusiasm grew for the strength found in cooperatively talking about the challenges that the individual schools were facing, ideas to address them, and the successful (or not so successful) undertakings they'd tried. By the end of the conference, Alexander remembered, "We had more than ten others who wanted in. From there, we all talked to friends and colleagues, and before we knew it, we had twenty colleges."

Hailing from all across the United States, most of the participating institutions, already were members of other collegial organizations, including the CIC, where Alexander's discussion took root. But in this nascent group, not only were participants finding solidarity in examining their common issues, but the group was small enough for everyone's voice to be heard, and all involved agreed that actually doing something—trying something—to address the issues they recognized in common was an end goal. No matter what specifically sparked at that first meeting—the right people, the right *number* of people, the right time—the group coalesced.

Describing his take on the big-picture challenges facing higher education, Jeffrey Docking, president of Adrian College, Michigan, put in focus what the group saw as its collective challenge: "The business

model for higher education is broken,” he said. “It’s most broken for small private liberal arts colleges across the country; it is really broken for all but the most sought-after schools. Do the numbers on the back of an envelope, and you’ll see how independent higher education is going to be out of reach for all but the 1 percent.” Though the words are Docking’s, the group seemed to share his thinking, including the idea that the answers to problems in higher education need to come from within the educational community itself—those living the issues day to day. Docking added, “We knew that [if we were going to do something,] we needed to lean into it with a large positive movement that will change how we do higher education.”

After the meeting at CIC’s Presidents Institute, the group’s momentum inspired members to continue the conversations by phone until, with support from the Lumina Foundation, they met face-to-face again in June 2015. Those attending the meeting included the original group of eleven presidents, plus Janet L. Holmgren, president emerita of Mills College and higher educational consultant, members of the Lumina team, and representatives of other foundations, including the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Because the participants were getting together to discuss a topic that interested the Lumina Foundation—creating a consortium through which independent colleges and universities would collaborate—Alexander explained, Lumina hosted the meeting, offering the group the space to gather in its Indianapolis office.

“We held a full-day workshop to discuss what we’d need to do to get funding to launch us,” Antoinette Hays, president of Regis College in Massachusetts, said, “[Lumina] had funded individual colleges in the past, but they were interested in funding collaborative efforts like the [proposed] consortium. . . .” Lumina’s interest marked the beginning of funders showing support for the group’s strong collaborative spirit—a characteristic that would become a pillar for the group and its work.

Knowing they wanted their group to be more than a periodic phone call or a once-a-year meeting, group members met again in January 2016 at the annual CIC’s Presidents Institute, continuing their discussions and also planning for the consortium as an ongoing organization with a set of shared goals. The group’s deliberate planning about a formal structure may have set them apart from other groups early on. As Janet Holmgren would later say, “Many efforts such as the LCMC end up being a once-a-year meeting, but there isn’t much to show for it other than the sense of belonging.” But at that 2016 meeting, Alexander said, “We developed objectives, established how we would communicate with each other. . . . We talked through challenges and impediments to a lower cost model. We agreed to help each other with experiences addressing these topics and agreed to share ideas and outcomes.”

As their joint effort took shape, it grew, becoming too time intensive for any one of the college presidents to manage. “It was too much for one person,” recalled Antoinette Hays. “It had become almost a full-time job.” This was especially true when, after the presidents’ initial meetings, they started adding other executive team members—chief financial officers, provosts, vice presidents of academic affairs, and faculty members. “If it was going to have financial implications,” Hays added, “we needed to get the other team members involved.” The presidents agreed: Keeping the individual institutions, their extended teams, and their boards informed would help the group get buy-in when and where it mattered.

To address these concerns, the members reached out again for funding, this time finding support from the Davis Educational Foundation* to engage Holmgren and Krishen Laetsch of Jangren Higher Education Consulting, LLC <<https://jangrenconsulting.com>>, to organize, convene, and facilitate the group in fall 2016 and again at CIC’s Presidents Institute in January 2017. It was at that 2017 meeting—through the creation of a memorandum of understanding, the establishment of annual dues, and the handling of other nuts-and-bolts matters—that eighteen college and university presidents agreed to form

the Lower Cost Models for Independent Colleges Consortium (LCMC). (See “LCMC Member Institutes” sidebar.)

Lifting off the Ground and Setting Initiatives

The newly minted LCMC hit the ground running thanks to its earlier years of informal discussion. With Lasell University as its host institution and Jangren Consulting as its facilitator, the consortium’s real work began. While garnering additional support from the Davis Educational Foundation and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the group defined its central work as “1) [supporting] each other in efforts to implement innovative programs that reduce costs both institutionally and to students, and 2) [engaging] in collaborative projects to broaden curricular opportunities for students and lower individual institutional costs for such programs and pass along the savings to students” as per the consortium’s website.

Even before their signatures had dried on the group’s agreement, members defined their first collaborative efforts through the following initiatives to promote affordability, accessibility, and the enhancement of a liberal arts education with opportunities for post baccalaureate employment:

- *The Certified Financial Planning Program.* The LCMC Certified Financial Planning (CFP) program consists of seven courses that students must complete to sit for the national examination of the Certified Financial Planning Board. Launched in early 2019, the online courses run eight weeks, earn three credits, and offer students an opportunity to add an advantageous credential to their studies.
- *The LCMC Google Group Partnership.* A subset of LCMC members has been working with Google to offer two introductory courses in applied computer science and data science specifically targeting students in the liberal arts (Applied Computing 101/Foundations of Python Programming and Applied Computing 201/How to Think Like a Data Scientist). The courses encourage students to explore using data learning in their careers and were offered during the 2018–2019 academic year.
- *The Applied Computer Science Program (ACS).* The goal of this program is to design, create, and implement eight courses, likely including cyber security and data analytics programming, that will prepare students to meet demands of the marketplace. Courses will be developed jointly but allow each institution to decide how to best utilize the courses toward major, minor, or certificate studies. The stated goal is to develop courses for 2020.
- *The RIZE Initiative.* This initiative was launched in 2019 by Adrian College president Jeffrey Docking, and the LCMC formally endorsed it at its inception. The RIZE initiative, with the LCMC at its core, is being developed among a growing group of colleges and universities to improve student outcomes while reducing tuition costs through a new course-sharing platform that will include course development relevant to corporations and specialized skills required for immediate employment. The purpose is to improve independent college and university offerings by increasing student access to high-demand courses and skills while simultaneously lowering costs.

“At some point, we realized we could develop programs jointly,” Jim Dlugos, president of Saint Joseph’s College of Maine, explained. “While new programs would be costly if we were to create them independently, through the consortium, we could share development costs. That thought morphed into discussions of what areas would add the most value to our program offerings. What would be of value to students in the world? Two years ago, what emerged were CFP and ACS as areas that would add value to our programs.”

Collaborative Curriculum Programs. The collaboration that had been so instrumental in creating the consortium’s structure supported and enhanced the curriculum development process, too. “We all own this; we all contributed to it,” Antoinette Hays explained, adding that although the process of adding any program to a school’s portfolio is different for each, having the consortium behind the program helped sell it. “We moved it quickly through. When we saw interest; we took it to the board and got it approved,” she said. “To be able to add curriculum to add potential is wonderful.”

Thus far, in regard to collaborative curriculum, the LCMC has established a template:

- Development and delivery costs are shared among the participating LCMC schools with support from educational foundations.
- The use cost of the program varies for each college, depending upon both the number of participating institutions and students.
- The revenue from students is retained by each institution.

Specific to the two collaborative programs already in development and use, courses are taught by faculty at participating LCMC institutions. And specific to the CFP program, the courses, which are online, run in a continuous sequence, enabling students at participating institutions to complete the seven courses plus a senior seminar and then enter the workforce with applicable skills and a desirable credential.

Christopher “Chris” Kubik, professor of finance and accounting at Regis College, is the program manager of the CFP course development, chairs the CFP Committee, and is one of the program instructors. Like Jim Dlugos, Kubik thinks the collaborative curriculum is a solid way to expand an institution’s offerings. “It provides opportunities for courses that each of these institutions would not be able to offer on its own,” Kubik agreed. “That’s a primary benefit from the students’ perspective. One could argue that [students] also get the expertise of the assigned faculty member—in theory they are getting the best of the best—but the other reality is that they simply wouldn’t have access to these courses otherwise. It’s pretty seamless from a student’s perspective.”

Regardless of what students understand of the LCMC’s internal workings, their feedback on the program is positive. Rainer Glimpel, a rising senior at Adrian College, is an accounting major working toward a CPA. “Being able to have online classes—the first two CFP classes fit in one slot over the semester—gave me flexibility, so I was able to tailor my workload to my needs,” said Glimpel, who had both on-the-ground and online courses and found strength in the combination. “You learn how to learn both ways. If all my classes had been online, I feel as if I wouldn’t be as nearly as involved and into [my program]. Because I had both, I feel it was a good balance.”

Jesse Schiavo, a Lasell University finance major, is taking the same CFP courses as Glimpel. Pleased with the CFP courses he has taken to date, he remarked that these are the first online courses he has taken with students from other institutions, characterizing that detail as an asset. “I guess you get a broader perspective than when you take classes with people in the same school,” he suggested. “Here we are learning the same things—or at least learning them in the same way.”

Another example of the program’s flexibility and desirability, Weston Reinbolt, a student taking the CFP courses through Heidelberg University, Ohio, is already on his career path, having earned a degree from Ohio State and currently working as a financial planner. “I’m trying to advance in the industry, stay accurate, and keep getting educated,” Reinbolt said of his intent to earn the CFP certificate. “The CFP program is convenient, especially for someone who works full time; it fits in my schedule.”

Reinbolt's experience illustrates why the LCMC chose to make the CFP and ACS programs and the partnership with Google among their first initiatives. As Pamela Gunter-Smith, president of York College of Pennsylvania, explained, being able to offer a career-focused outcome, which students and their families are looking for, remains something with which small, private institutions are concerned. Keeping an institution's offerings competitive is critical.

Google: Another Kind of Collaboration. While the work that LCMC members are engaged in with Google does not fall into the same category as the LCMC-developed curriculum programs, it similarly increases an institution's offerings, provides students with career-focused opportunities, and, distinctively, presents a collaboration between business and education that truly benefits both.

As Cristin Frodella, senior program lead with Google for Education, explained, the work came out of a discussion with Jeffrey Docking, who approached Google with a thought to benefit both business and education, and specifically small liberal arts institutions. In today's educational environment—a period rocked by small schools falling into financial difficulties and even closing—Docking observed that many among the small institutions that are surviving are those bringing pre-professional skills to their schools.

But what the Docking/LCMC and Google conversation brought to the forefront, Frodella explained, was that as much as this is a concern in education no matter which side of the desk you're on, it also affects business. "Companies are unable to fill roles—specifically those in the data fields—because data literacy skills are nascent," she said. "Though schools are developing courses to drive data skills, there still isn't enough of a supply to fill the market demand, and we know that by 2020, there will be 2.7 million data-related job openings in the United States. Our courses strive to give students the data literacy skills they'll need to succeed in the market."

Holmgren summarized the LCMC/Google work, which currently involves six LCMC institutions, in this way: "[Google has] been trying to learn from us as we benefit from their expertise. In turn, we've been trying to extend that to other schools in the collaboration."

The Group That LCMC Built: What Makes It Different

No matter the angle from which you scrutinize the LCMC, you see a purposeful, innovative entity. From the intentional way the consortium came into being, to the questions members ask themselves, to the suggestions they offer one another, (whether in answer to an individual problem or to the group's collective inquiry), to the way members brought in teams from their institutions to avoid the LCMC being another top-down endeavor, the deep thinking, long-term vision, and, always, great care behind everything they do are apparent.

"The idea of collaboration and making higher education more cost-effective began our discussion," Antoinette Hays explained. "As a group, we were looking to decrease cost, which would, in turn, decrease student cost."

To this, any one of the presidents is certain to add that in setting a focus on affordability and accessibility, the consortium's efforts also support their institutions' student-centered philosophies and, consequentially, the liberal arts way of education to which they all adhere. Said Pamela Gunter-Smith, "One thing that all of the LCMC institutes have in common is a focus on students; the LCMC helps us provide what we couldn't provide individually."

That's where the LCMC came in, but what is unfolding from its work promises much more. That promise certainly feeds members' enthusiasm, but it is also what makes the consortium different from other groups and attracts outside attention, including that of funders.

"We [fund] a lot of individual institutions' projects—helping a college revamp its general education curriculum, professional development for faculty—we do a lot of that type of funding," said Leanne Greeley Bond, director of grants and programs with the Davis Educational Foundation. "But we're interested in collaboration; we see them as a cost efficient way of delivering education. . . . [The way the LCMC] came together as a group of presidents interested in doing something collaborative—they are starting in a way that I think is unique and advantageous."

She defined "unique and advantageous" with an example that suggests that the consortium functions as a team while honoring the individual. "Even though they came together for common needs, they recognize that as they put it into practice not every single member needs to lock arms and say 'We're going forward with this,'" So if they were to have only a dozen of the eighteen interested in a particular effort, she went on to say, "The other six are perfectly fine in saying 'That's not for us right now.' There is a recognition that not everyone needs to be on board for everything."

Speaking with those involved in the consortium is to understand Greeley Bond's comments. You hear the administrative teams, the course instructors—even funders—using words such as *trust* and *support* and *collaboration*—often. There is the sense that what started out as a "mutual support society," as one president affectionately characterized the group at its outset, has morphed into a new kind of entity that will shake up everyone's expectations for the betterment of all. Perhaps Antoinette Hays said it best. "There are many reasons why the consortium materialized," she reflected, talking about all of the issues mentioned here (and in so many discussions of higher education today) facing especially the liberal arts institutions. "Among them, we realized we can't be working in isolation anymore, and that we had many benefits in coming together."

Jeffrey Docking's thoughts echoed Hays's, recalling that, in the past, schools played it "close to the vest" with matters such as ways to increase funding, means to build enrollment, etc., keeping successes secret and to themselves. Every institution faced the challenges on its own. "Instead, we are now on the phone working for the good of the whole," Docking pointed out. "We are not just helping ourselves, but we are helping families and kids, who would otherwise get lost at bigger institutions."

That's important to the way these liberal arts institutions define themselves, but it's also important to maintaining the opportunity of a liberal arts education in a difficult time in higher education's history. "Higher education consortiums like the LCMC can improve student success via curricula development and cross-institutional collaborations," Jangren's consulting manger Krishen Arvind Laetsch offered. "It's a tough-minded business approach, and it's enjoying early success." And as Charles Flynn, president of the College of Mount Saint Vincent, New York, described the entirety of this endeavor, Michael Alexander's efforts to create a group to strategize and innovate "was an effort to help to ensure that this incredible part of the sector would survive."

True to what seems the LCMC's nature, for every challenge the members came together to solve, they have also found—or perhaps focused on—the added incentives that come out of that work. It's as if, together, they can't help but see the positive and the upside.

“It’s good to gather people and to get them to talk to and listen to one another,” Holmgren said of the LCMC. “There are opportunities to learn and see outside the box and to build trust. One important strength of the LCMC members is that they have built trust and collaboration into their DNA.”

Through that effort, Holmgren concluded, “They are facing the future together and looking to enhance the effort with new program development and thoughtful growth to make the consortium even more effective and efficient in lowering the costs of high-quality independent colleges and universities.”

For more information please visit: <https://lcmc.info> and <https://jangrenconsulting.com>

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About the author: Amy Bauman has been writing and editing professionally for more than thirty years. Now through Bauman Wordsmiths, of Ashland, Oregon, she continues her dance with words across a wide spectrum of projects, genres, and communication needs. She can be reached at baumamy1605@gmail.com.

[Sidebar]

LCMC Member Institutions

The Lower Costs Models for Independent Colleges Consortium is currently made up of nineteen member institutions. Those institutions, their locations, and their presidents are listed below (in alphabetical order).

- Adrian College, Adrian, Michigan (Jeffrey Docking, President)
<http://adrian.edu>
- Alvernia University, Reading, Pennsylvania (John Loyack, President)
<http://alvernia.edu>
- Bay Path University, Longmeadow, Massachusetts (Carol Leary, President)
<http://baypath.edu>
- Bridgewater College, Bridgewater, Virginia (David Bushman, President)
<http://bridgewater.edu>
- Centre College, Danville, Kentucky (John Roush, President)
<http://centre.edu>
- Chatham University, Pittsburg, Pennsylvania (David Finegold, President)
<http://chatham.edu>
- College of Mount Saint Vincent, Riverdale, New York (Charles L. Flynn, Jr., President)
<http://mountsaintvincent.edu>
- Heidelberg University, Tiffin, Ohio (Robert Huntington, President)
<http://heidelberg.edu>
- Holy Names University, Oakland, California (Michael Groener, President)
<http://hnu.edu>
- Lasell University, Newton, Massachusetts (Michael Alexander, President)
<http://lasell.edu>
- Lesley University, Cambridge, Massachusetts (Janet Steinmayer, President)
<http://lesley.edu>
- Mary Baldwin University, Staunton, Virginia (Pamela Fox, President)
<http://marybaldwin.edu>
- Mills College, Oakland, California (Beth Hillman, President)
<http://mills.edu>
- Norwich University, Northfield, Vermont (Richard W. Schneider, President)
<http://norwich.edu>
- Regis College, Weston, Massachusetts (Antoinette Hays, President)
<http://regiscollege.edu>
- Roger Williams University, Bristol, Rhode Island (Ioannis Miaoulis, President)
<http://rwu.edu>
- Saint Joseph's College of Maine, Standish, Maine (Jim Dlugos, President)
<http://sjcme.edu>
- University of La Verne, La Verne, California (Devorah Lieberman, President)
<http://laverne.edu>
- York College of Pennsylvania, York, Pennsylvania (Pamela Gunter-Smith, President)
<http://ycp.edu>

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