

FEATURE ARTICLE

Designing and Implementing Systemic Academic Change

Hiram College's Model for the New Liberal Arts

by Lori Varlotta

The Hiram College president offers a constructive and realistic example of systemic change designed to help liberal arts institutions not only survive but thrive in the face of 21st-century challenges.

INTRODUCTION: THE CALLS FOR CHANGE AND THE RESOURCES TO RESPOND

Let's face it. There is a new normal for most institutions of higher learning, and tuition-driven liberal arts colleges are, or should be, at the forefront of the change. The new normal is marked by a host of calls from internal and external stakeholders and by industry challenges such as changing demographics, financial outlooks, and value propositions.

THE CALLS FOR CHANGE

Increasingly, these calls and challenges have a palpably firm grip on the programs, practices, and cultures of many small, non-elite, liberal arts colleges. Leaders of institutions like mine—Hiram College (OH)—must routinely respond to internal and external calls to demonstrate things like institutional accountability, expense management, student access, student debt containment, the ROI of the degree, and navigable career pathways. There are additional calls to increase new student enrollment, retention, and graduation rates; net tuition revenues; and extramural funding. As these calls ring in our ears, we must simultaneously face, head-on, challenges such as unfavorable high school demographics (Marcus 2017), Moody's grim financial outlook for the sector (Fain 2017), and public and political pessimism regarding the liberal arts (APM Reports 2018).

As the president of Hiram, I am leading an institution that, amid all the challenges above, needs to change quickly and materially. If we continue to do things in the same ways as in the past, or if we tinker with changes only at the margins, the grip of this reality will not just squeeze us in the short term; it will strangle the very life out of our beloved institution. Rather than be extinguished by these pressures, I have been leading the campus through a dramatic change process that includes growing in some areas, cutting in others, and modifying the entire academic structure (first-year experience, majors, core, graduation requirements, and student learning outcomes).

As part of the change process, Hiram has already spent one academic year (2016–17) crafting a strategic plan as described in detail below. We then used the 2017–18 academic year to flesh out and prioritize the action steps most needed to pave our path forward. As we enter the 2018–19 academic year, we are beginning to implement the comprehensive, rather than compartmentalized, changes summoned in the plan. We embark on an accelerated implementation process knowing full well that cultural and structural change does not occur easily or quickly at many liberal arts colleges.

RESOURCES THAT INFORM THE CHANGE PROCESS

To aid our efforts, we have scoured articles and webinars on liberal arts innovations. As most readers of this article know, there are informative websites, signature activities, and research projects from membership organizations such as the Council of Independent Colleges (CIC) and the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities (NAICU). The plethora of resources from these two organizations alone is too weighty to mention. But a recent report from the CIC, *Innovation and the Independent College: Examples from the Sector*, deserves a callout for being a practical and constructive compilation of innovative examples of curricular changes, consortial agreements, cost containment approaches, and cocurricular activities (Hetrick, Katz, and Nugent 2018).

In addition to the aforementioned CIC report, I have relished reading informative industry articles about signature programs and niche development (Biemiller 2018). Adding a signature program is a viable strategy for certain institutions at certain times. Like Agnes Scott College, Connecticut College, and Dominican University, Hiram, too, has added innovative and relevant signature programs in the recent past. Our three most highly successful ones are Tech and Trek (Hiram College 2018d), Hiram Health (Hiram College 2016), and Hiram Complete (Hiram College 2018a).

But to truly transform Hiram at this point in our evolutionary development, we must actualize programmatic change, what Mary Marcy (2017) calls the “Distinctive Program Model,” while simultaneously designing what Marcy calls the “New American College Model.” In this sense, Hiram is striving to create a macro-change model that doesn’t fit neatly into Marcy’s typology of change models for liberal arts colleges.

The change we seek to make is *systemic* change: change that pervades all parts of the system or structure and the relationships among the system’s various parts. And frankly, it is not frequently depicted, let alone fully fleshed out, in

articles I have seen or workshops I have attended. Since published articles and professionally organized workshops are still a little lean in this area, my team and I are thankful to have found a handful of colleagues elsewhere who have generously shared their own academic change stories and insights with us. Their counsel and collegiality has been invaluable.

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What I heard from presidents elsewhere, and you will hear from me, is no surprise. Systemic change is incredibly hard. But chances are, it is, or will be, necessary at many institutions across the country, especially tuition-driven liberal arts ones. As more of my colleagues begin to contemplate this type of change, I offer this article. I hope it provides a constructive and realistic example of systemic change, five possible steps that academic leaders and trustees might consider before triggering it, and a few key takeaways, or lessons from the field.

STEP ONE: HIGHLIGHT, NORMALIZE, AND CELEBRATE THE CHANGE THAT MARKS YOUR HISTORY

Early in Hiram’s change process, I took the opportunity in many speaking venues to highlight the ways that liberal arts colleges in general, and Hiram in particular, have changed over the last two centuries. At the macro level, the crux of the story debunked the myths that liberal arts colleges have been static and eternal. Our narrative explained how “change,” “flexibility,” and “nimbleness” have long been part of Hiram’s DNA. And, to drive that point home, our story focused on changing and expanding the “who, what, where, when, how, and why of liberal arts colleges.” For well over a year, at college town halls, alumni gatherings, homecoming weekend, and elsewhere, the Hiram leadership team reminded

audiences that Hiram had endured and become stronger *because of*, not *despite*, changes in our who, what, where, when, how, and why (Hiram College 2017b).

The change narrative that leaders elsewhere construct will be different from ours. No matter what form it takes, however, it is fundamentally important to remind internal and external stakeholders “what is,” “what could be,” “what should be,” and “what will be” (Dumestre 2015). In doing so, audiences will quickly be reminded that there has rarely been stasis on our individual campuses or throughout the sector. Starting any change process from that vantage point is hugely advantageous.

The following outlines the who, what, where, when, how, and why of yesterday’s Hiram.

THE WHO

Hiram College is proud of its history of admitting women and African American students as early as 1850 (Anderson 2003). Even with early policies that allowed for racial and gender diversity, for most of the 20th century, Hiram, and other colleges like it, largely attracted White, traditional-age students from average or above-average means. A good number were “legacy” students from families who had longtime connections to the institution.

By the mid-1970s, Hiram expanded its *who*, or its targeted students, by becoming one of the first institutions in the Midwest to create a Weekend College. As one of the earliest programs of its kind, the Weekend College attracted a large number of working adults who completed their degrees by enrolling in courses offered Friday night through Sunday afternoon. Our “who” has continued to change and expand during the early part of the 21st century.

THE WHEN AND THE WHERE

The Weekend College enjoyed great recruitment and graduation success for three decades. But as online programs offered elsewhere began to proliferate, the once novel and flexible delivery mode of the Weekend College seemed outdated and confining to most adults. In an effort to continue serving this population, we knew we needed to further expand the *when* and the *where* of Hiram’s liberal arts.

In 2013 Hiram introduced a program called Hiram Complete (Hiram College 2018a) that started bringing Hiram—literally—to several regional community colleges. As part of Hiram Complete, associate degree graduates can move seamlessly into a Hiram BA program by taking Hiram courses at their “home” campus. With Hiram Complete, Hiram faculty drive to three partner community colleges in the Greater Cleveland area to offer classes on site. Within two years, Hiram Complete students earn a Hiram baccalaureate at the same college location where they earned their two-year degree.

THE HOW

Hiram has been a longtime pioneer in constructing different delivery modes for its curriculum. A notable example of *how* we deliver the liberal arts is our current Hiram Plan (Hiram College 2018c)—one that morphed out of the delivery modes of the 1930s to 1950s. At that time, Hiram was one of the earliest colleges, maybe even the first, to offer a single plan of study in which students took one course at a time. The college moved from that format to trimesters, then to the modified semesters we have today in 1995. Presently, students enroll in a “regular” 12-week term during which they take three or four classes (most are four credits). They then enjoy a one-week break and come back for an intensive, single-course three-week session. During the three-week session, students attend one class four times a week, and most of the courses are experiential in nature.

THE WHAT

From its inception in 1850, Hiram has been a liberal arts college, replete with programs often associated with such institutions. But the college's willingness to think outside the conventional box began in its first decade of existence. From its beginning, Hiram has routinely changed the *what* of the liberal arts. Take its addition of education as the first example. Many traditionalists question the place of "education" at a liberal arts college. But our education program dates back to the mid-1800s when Hiram was known as the Western Reserve Eclectic Institute. It was introduced to the campus by Hiram's most notorious student, professor, and president: James A. Garfield. He added a teacher's curriculum in 1859 for students who wanted to enter the education profession.

In more recent decades, Hiram has added professional programs, applied programs, and business programs. Hiram introduced its first business major in business management in 1977 and its first computer major in systems management in 1999. In 2006, Hiram expanded its business major offerings to include accounting and financial management. One year later, the college created its first bachelor of science degree when it welcomed its inaugural class of nursing majors. Most of these business and pre-professional majors are our most popular ones in terms of student enrollment. It is important to note that at Hiram, all of these majors are built on a strong liberal arts foundation in which students take writing-across-the-curriculum courses and fulfill the same core/general education requirements required of students in other majors.

Expansion into majors in business and other professional fields and the increasing numbers of students opting into them are commonplace throughout the country. These are the primary reasons why the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching changed its well-known classification system 25 years ago. In 1994, the foundation did away with the categories of Liberal Arts Colleges I and II. Respectively, those categories had formerly referred

to colleges that had selective admissions and awarded at least half of their bachelor's degrees in the liberal arts and less selective colleges that awarded large numbers of pre-professional degrees. When studies in the early 1990s showed that 70 percent of the less-selective Liberal Arts II Colleges were awarding a majority of their bachelor's degrees in professional fields, the entire classification was changed, with the liberal arts group renamed as Baccalaureate Colleges I and II.

Baccalaureate I Colleges are those with selective admissions that award at least 40 percent of their degrees in the liberal arts. Baccalaureate II Colleges are those with either less-selective admissions or that award fewer than 40 percent of their degrees in the liberal arts. Ernest Boyer, the Carnegie Foundation president at the time, was on record saying that "the new method of classifying colleges on the basis of degree level 'brings still more clarity and objectivity' to the process" (Evangelou 1994, ¶ 21).

THE WHY

Perhaps the *why* of the liberal arts has been the slowest part to change at Hiram and elsewhere. From their earliest beginnings and throughout the 20th century, liberal arts colleges like Hiram have described themselves as places that encouraged the unfettered exchange of ideas. Most often, they were the places where ideas, concepts, and theories reigned supreme for decades, even centuries. Correspondingly, liberal arts colleges touted the fact that they existed, in large part, to produce well-read and well-rounded students.

Educating students to be well read and well rounded is a necessary and noble *why* of liberal arts colleges. Given, however, the current and aspiring student populations that vast numbers of liberal arts colleges serve, I believe these are merely necessary and by no means sufficient aims. Hence, as will be described later, the aim of the New Liberal Arts, as we have termed our comprehensive model of change, goes well beyond this.

STEP TWO: LINK THE FORTHCOMING CHANGE TO SOMETHING LARGER, LIKE A STRATEGIC PLAN

One year ago, Hiram completed a 16-month institution-wide strategic planning process that aimed to position the college as a national model for the New Liberal Arts. Importantly, the process was a highly inclusive, transparent, and data-driven one, open to all interested members of the community.

The bulk of the work was undertaken by five faculty-led workgroups. The leaders and the seven- or eight-member groups met many times over the course of a year. The groups crafted and vetted ideas that were shared, tested, and refined during many open forums and discussion sessions. They then wrote respective concept papers that were stitched together as the first draft of the plan. Yet another small group of faculty, staff, and administrators revised the emerging whole and shared the next iteration with the campus community. After several more revised versions, a final draft was presented to the Board of Trustees for approval. (See Hiram College 2017c for the executive summary of *Hiram College's Strategic Plan 2017–2020*.)

As stated in the strategic plan, Hiram is immensely proud that our current student body is approximately 40 percent first generation and 46 percent Pell eligible. We are even prouder of the fact that we graduate these students at higher rates than predictive models would suggest. Still, to strengthen our financial footing and diversify our learning community, we need to attract a larger number of students with financial means from diverse backgrounds and geographic regions. We also need an academic structure that ensures that students from all walks of life study and learn intensely from each other. Hence, the strategic plan clearly explains why a “business as usual” philosophy and practice are no longer viable. It also portrays how the emerging New Liberal Arts could bolster the recruitment, retention, and learning of the students we currently enroll and those we aspire to enroll in greater numbers.

As part of positioning Hiram as the New Liberal Arts, we knew we needed to consider adding, cutting, changing, and integrating the curricular and cocurricular programs we offer. And the plan that was cocreated by dozens of members of the community clearly delineates Hiram’s intention to do all of these. This section describes what Hiram’s plan calls for and the process used to enact the plan.

CONCEPTUALIZING ADDITIONS AND ENHANCEMENTS

Direct excerpts from the strategic plan call on faculty, staff, and administrators to make the types of “positive,” “creative,” and even “enjoyable” changes that are often included in collegiate strategic plans. In this vein, the plan underscores Hiram’s need to identify which new (mission-driven/market-wise) programs and delivery modes (e.g., majors or minors, new areas of concentration) the college should add and which it should change to increase enrollment with minimal expense. On pages 12–13 of the plan an action item reads exactly as follows:

Repackage the curriculum with an eye toward language that appeals to myriad segments of the student body (first-year, transfer, traditional, and adult).

- » Promote substantially new market-driven majors (e.g., Integrative Exercise Science, Public Health).
- » Rename and/or better message majors, minors, and concentrations to make them more relevant to today’s students.
- » Further update the college website to connect majors to 21st-century careers and highlight the success of alumni.
- » Better leverage the interdisciplinary co-curricula of the Centers of Distinction. (Hiram College 2017a, pp. 12–13)

CONCEPTUALIZING MERGERS AND DISCONTINUATIONS

A less common and much more difficult to conceive and implement part of the strategic plan compelled administrators and faculty to think about (and eventually act on) the *academic* programs and services that needed to be merged or discontinued in light of our current financial situation.

Let me share some context here. Even after making cuts throughout 2014–16 to staff and nearly all other operational areas of the college, our ongoing revenues were still not aligned with baseline expenses. Until this point, we had held full-time faculty harmless in all rounds of cuts. However, our 2017–18 student-to-faculty ratio hovered around 9:1, and this was simply not sustainable.

So as not to take anyone by surprise over the impending academic reductions, the Senior Cabinet and I discussed them at length and at various venues. Over and over, we explained that if we did not hit our very aggressive enrollment goals (including a 36 percent increase in new student enrollment over the previous year), we would regrettably need to both reduce the overall number of faculty and redistribute faculty lines from underenrolled areas to highly enrolled ones. In addition to talking frequently about the probable reductions, reconfigurations, and mergers, we spelled them out in the strategic plan:

All academic programs need to be examined within this emerging framework [the New Liberal Arts]. Thus far, there appears to be significant campus support for retaining many, if not most, of the “traditional” majors; *however, open consideration of merging, modifying, or discontinuing some programs must be undertaken.* (Hiram College 2017a, p. 5; emphasis added)

As it turned out, the gravity and certainty of the academic cuts we made still came as a surprise to some faculty who could not fathom that their programs and, by extension, their

positions could be cut. A few who came to see themselves as vulnerable were unwilling or unable to participate constructively and objectively in a redesign process that might impact them personally and professionally. Such a reaction is a part of human nature, and leaders must brace for it in advance, preparing for the potentially negative and disruptive manifestations of faculty fear.

CONCEPTUALIZING DELIVERY FORMATS AND OUTCOMES OF COURSES AND MAJORS

The strategic plan also states that the college must think creatively to establish how it expects to deliver existing and future programs. For over a year now, we have committed ourselves to the fact that a large part of our “how” will include Tech and Trek’s mindful technology, as described later in this article.

Additionally, the strategic plan states that any new model adopted by the college must help students develop the 21st-century skills they need for both a productive career and a happy life. The plan explicitly calls for administrators, faculty, and staff alike to ensure that curricular and cocurricular programs foster both the age-old liberal arts skills (e.g., critical thinking, oral and written communication, team building, and problem solving) and the 21st-century ones (e.g., technological and computational skills) that today’s students need to chart a changing and diverse career path.

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STEP 3: DESIGN AN INCLUSIVE, TRANSPARENT, AND DATA-DRIVEN CHANGE PROCESS

As we set out to examine the educational strengths and financial feasibility of our academic programs, our newly

appointed senior academic officer, the vice president for academic affairs and dean of the college (“dean” for short), chose to use the Delaware Cost Study (University of Delaware 2018) as a model for framing our own analysis of academic costs and departmental productivity. As will be described below, the dean, in consultation with the faculty chair, formed an ad hoc committee called the Strategic Academic Team (SAT) to help her shape and execute a process for program prioritization.

Hiram’s prioritization process was a bipartite one that included two intertwined steps. First, each existing academic program completed a self-study report whose questions were based on criteria adapted from Dickeson’s (2010) model. These criteria were vetted by all full-time faculty and translated into prompts that included the following:

- » How does your department contribute to the liberal arts core?
- » How does your department and the majors it offers prompt students to translate thinking into doing?
- » How does your department and the programs within it align with Hiram’s mission?
- » Describe the quality and reputation of your department and its majors, as evidenced by student learning outcomes assessments, faculty scholarship, and alumni success.
- » Describe the current and predicted demand for the program, use of resources, and programmatic track record for innovation, adaptability, and collaboration.

Step two of the process invited all faculty and staff to submit “innovation proposals” that described potential mergers or new initiatives. Half of the 66 proposals submitted focused on adding or merging academic programs; the other half described possible changes to academic structures, procedures, or cocurricular activities.

All of the materials generated in steps one and two, plus a mountain of data compiled by the Office of Institutional Research, were made available to all faculty throughout this process. Materials were posted routinely on the faculty portal, and they were the topic of many meetings throughout the semester.

It is crucially important for administrators to align whatever change process they create with relevant academic policies and handbook provisions that exist at their campus. If policies and handbooks need to be reviewed and revised, it is imperative that those changes be made before, rather than during, a systemic change process. As we set out to embark on the Hiram change process, I read the faculty handbook closer than I had ever read it before. And frankly, it had some gaps and inconsistencies that made the change process very bumpy in places. Thankfully, however, it also contained sections that allowed us to be creative and expansive. I will briefly outline some of the opportunities it afforded.

It will come as little surprise to colleagues at other liberal arts colleges that Hiram’s faculty handbook required any academic change process that potentially affected majors, minors, and faculty lines to include two shared governance committees (the Academic Program Committee [APC] and the Appointment, Tenure, and Promotion Committee [ATP]) and the faculty at large. But the handbook also allowed the dean to create a faculty ad hoc committee at her discretion to help address academic issues that warranted faculty examination and input. The change process at hand definitely fell into this category since it was one that would shape recommendations that would lead not only to the enhancement and addition of some programs but also to the shrinkage and reduction of others. As the dean launched this critical and somber process, she stated clearly and broadly that she would, of course, abide by the faculty handbook and work with the two constitutional committees and the overall faculty, all of whom are necessarily consulted when major academic change, including downsizing, is being planned.

But the dean was also clear that she would exercise the option of forming a special ad hoc faculty group, the aforementioned Strategic Academic Team (SAT). And she did so, in close consultation with the faculty chair. She explained that while the constitutional committees (the ATP and APC) needed to weigh in on the change process, they also had their important and routine work that needed their attention (Dickeson 2010). Therefore, she wanted a special committee whose sole task was to advise her on program prioritization and change proposals. Given the weightiness and sensitivity of the task, she required all SAT members to pledge to put the well-being of the overall campus ahead of any single department.

Because the academic prioritization process was highly data driven, SAT and the two constitutional committees waded through mounds of data. After months of reviewing data and holding meetings and discussions, each group presented its final set of recommendations to the dean who then forwarded them to me. The recommendations from the faculty committees included several lists: new programs that should be added and existing programs that should either be maintained in relatively consistent form, enhanced and allocated more resources, shifted from majors to minors, or eliminated.

Meanwhile, two faculty-as-a-whole meetings were dedicated to collecting input from all faculty, and summaries of those meetings were also sent to me. I reviewed all of these materials before formulating the recommendations I would present to the Board of Trustees regarding programmatic and faculty change.

All of this work was extraordinarily challenging for our campus community. Over the course of the semester during which the work took place, I held approximately 130 face-to-face meetings with faculty, students, alumni, advisory boards, and trustees regarding the probable rightsizing and redistribution of faculty lines. During these meetings, I modeled the respect, kindness, empathy, and open-mindedness I wished to see (and often did) throughout

campus. As part of this modeling, I listened to concerns, solicited feedback, answered questions, did more research, and consulted with external experts from the CIC and NAICU. All members of my Senior Cabinet also served as leadership role models, holding an additional 75 meetings with their own staffs and stakeholders.

Frankly, I am as pleased with how we achieved the many changes we made or are about to make as I am with the substance of the changes themselves. Finally, I am immensely proud that my lean leadership team and I continued to manage and lead all of the other business of the campus during this time period since the change process demanded continuous time, attention, intervention, and reassurance.

STEP FOUR: NAME AND FRAME THE MODEL OF CHANGE THE CAMPUS EXPECTS TO ACTUALIZE

From the very beginning of the redesign process, we were clear that Hiram's model for academic change needed to do much more than reflect a new brand, tagline, or program. The college's long-term success depended on designing a model that could communicate a differentiating undergraduate experience that both grows and diversifies enrollment *and* underscores high-impact, integrative student learning. Aligned with Michael B. Poliakoff (2017, ¶ 5), president of the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, we believe that "faculty members and administrators have an obligation to give students the framework they need to grow intellectually and graduate." Hence, we set out to design a model that isn't just pretty. It is thorough and tactical. Equally important, it is comprehensible to prospective students and parents from all backgrounds and walks of life.

The college's long-term success depended on designing a model that could communicate a differentiating undergraduate experience that both grows and diversifies enrollment and underscores high-impact, integrative student learning.

Striving to meet all of these highly ambitious goals, we have designed a comprehensive model of change called the New Liberal Arts. The new model includes four constitutive elements:

1. An enhanced freshman year experience that prompts students to ponder enduring questions,
2. A highly integrated major that is attached to one of five schools,
3. A coherent core curriculum centered around urgent challenges and emergent opportunities, and
4. High-impact experiential activities such as an internship, study-away trip, guided research experiment, or service learning project, one of which is required of all students and all of which are explicitly connected to either the major or the core.

Ambitiously or “insanely,” depending on your frame of reference, we are working to revise each of these four elements concurrently.

The work of creating a systemic model of change has been by no means mine alone. Like every major initiative I have led at Hiram, this one, from its very inception, has been a collective effort. Pieces of the model described below were first championed by the faculty work groups that informed the strategic plan. Several months later, a group of faculty dubbed the “Innovators” brought other key pieces to the forefront of our collective thinking. I asked the Innovators to present a skeletal model to the college’s Executive Steering Committee and to various college advisory boards. I listened intently to all conversations, typed the burgeoning ideas on my mobile device, and pieced them together as an infographic. I shared these notes and visuals with the Senior Cabinet, the Innovators, the trustees, and several groups of staff.

The institutionally generated ideas served as a launch pad for two external consultants from the RAND Corporation who

were brought in to accelerate the design and implementation of the emerging model. The consultants expedited our work by meeting with well over 100 people during three visits to campus. They helped me further weave the keen insights and suggestions from others into a continuously changing model that improved at every iteration.

As described in the next several sections, the model includes many layers and nuances. To make it easier to digest, we have worked hard to frame the model as a visual that fits on a single page. Our model of the New Liberal Arts is framed by four elements and a series of outcomes as depicted in figure 1.

STEP 5: FORMULATE CLEAR EXPLANATIONS AND RATIONALES FOR EACH COMPONENT OF THE MODEL

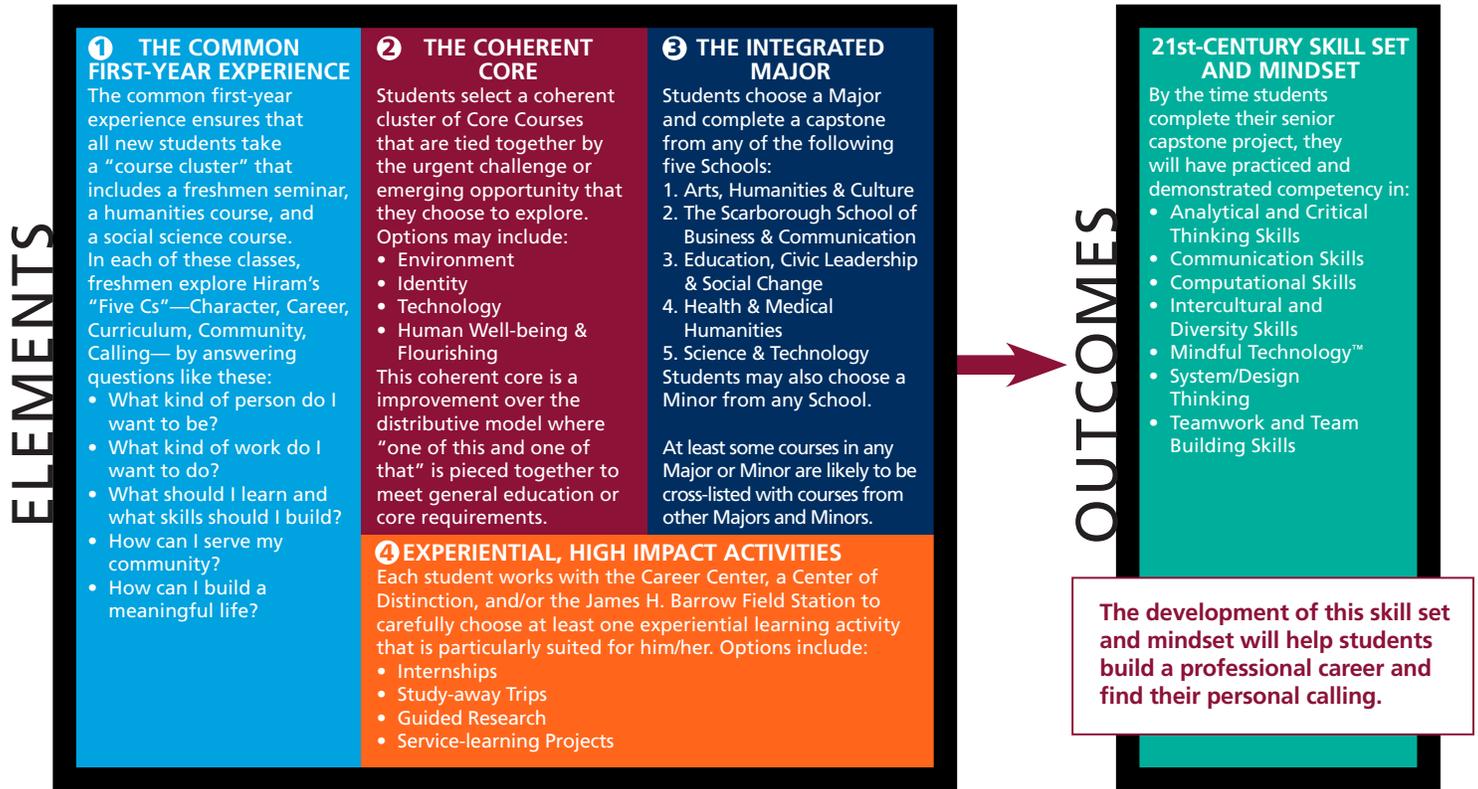
As I began to roll out the emerging model for the New Liberal Arts, I found it helpful and consistent to harken back to the “who, what, where, when, how, and why” that had now become a centerpiece of many Hiram discussions on and beyond campus. Using those same markers to describe the changes the new model is meant to catalyze made perfect sense to many of our internal and external stakeholders.

THE WHO OF THE NEW LIBERAL ARTS

Today, 30 percent of Hiram students identify as students of color, and an even larger percentage are first generation and/or Pell eligible. We are proudly, but little known to some, more diverse than a number of state universities in our region.

Ironically, while Hiram has significantly changed and expanded the *who* of the liberal arts, it is time to diversify the existing student body yet again. Today, we must attract and retain at least some full-pay or near full-pay students. Hence, the New Liberal Arts is being designed with various kinds of students in mind, and the college must offer enticing opportunities to all of them.

Figure 1 **The Elements and Outcomes of the New Liberal Arts at Hiram College**



THE WHEN AND THE WHERE OF THE NEW LIBERAL ARTS

As promising as Hiram Complete seemed a short five years ago, change has come quickly to the community college sector of education. Enrollment at community colleges in Ohio has taken a hit over the last few years, and competition for qualified transfer students is fierce in this part of the country (Yost 2018). Therefore, we plan to use the New Liberal Arts to refine and bolster the Hiram Complete program. One way we expect to do this is to create more transfer scholarships for this population. We believe that community college students, especially those who earn a scholarship to defray costs, will be very attracted to a collegiate model that is rooted in the liberal arts but forward focused in terms of 21st-century skills, career pathways, and the like.

THE FOUR “WHATS” OF THE NEW LIBERAL ARTS

These include the Common First-Year Experience, Integrated Major, Coherent Core, and Experiential Activities:

- » *The Common First-Year Experience.* Incoming freshmen at Hiram, like elsewhere, participate in a First-Year Experience (FYE) that familiarizes them with the college’s academic expectations and community norms while helping them develop college-level writing and discourse skills. But as part of the New Liberal Arts, we also want new students to begin their undergraduate experience by learning how to be self-reflective and contemplative. Reflection and contemplation are part of a program called Hiram Connect (Hiram College 2018b) that we launched two years ago. As the name implies, the program requires students to think about the *connections* between and among classroom conversations, experiential activities, theoretical

concepts, personal beliefs, and group norms. As part of Hiram Connect, students examine these connections via the lens of the Hiram Five Cs: character, community, career, curriculum, and calling.

Two years into Hiram Connect, we see that we must focus the spotlight more directly on the Five Cs. Toward that end, the New Liberal Arts FYE program will prod students to grapple with the Cs: identifying which ones are already guiding their undergraduate journey and sorting out which are easy to wrap their heads around and which give them pause.

Hence, one of the pedagogical aims of the New Liberal Arts—and one we will make more explicit—is to teach students how to engage in self-reflection and understand the importance of “knowing thyself” (Haberberger 2017). As students learn how to critically examine their own values, interests, and aspirations, they will be better equipped to understand, work with, and empathize with people who are different from themselves, and these are intended outcomes of the New Liberal Arts.

- » *The Integrated Major.* For more than 50 years, students at Hiram have been required to take two INTD or interdisciplinary courses, one of which must have been team-taught. This means the notion of integrative and interdisciplinary studies is by no means new to Hiram. As it turns out, however, most of the INTD courses are embedded in the core curriculum rather than being a feature of the majors. As part of the New Liberal Arts, we expect to have upper-division INTD courses in the majors.

At the present time, students declare and pursue the typical one or two majors and maybe a minor from an array of more than 30 majors and even more minors. In only a few cases are upper-division courses in one major cross-listed with those in another. This means that most of the learning associated with the major itself is more “vertical” (reinforces the disciplinary tradition of

whatever major the student is taking) than “horizontal” (spans multiple disciplines that are similar to and different from the major). To add to this issue, at small colleges like ours, a number of upper-level courses, especially those in undersubscribed majors, might have only a handful of students in each class. It breaks my heart (and the college’s wallet) when students tell me, “President Varlotta, small classes are good, but tiny ones are dreadful.” Hence, we want the structure of the New Liberal Arts to ensure that students develop not only a deep understanding of issues but a broad one, too. We also want the new structure to significantly increase the number of students in upper-division courses.

Toward these particular ends, we have designed our new academic structure to cluster majors under a larger academic umbrella called “schools.” Since some upper-division courses from one major will be cross-listed with upper-division courses from another major within the same school, students will hear and learn from a larger number of their peers within their school. They will also see how the theories and methods from a related major in their school can shed a useful but different light on the same topic. This should help students develop an affinity to both their major and the school that houses it.

Our five interdisciplinary schools (figure 2) have shaped up as follows: (1) Arts, Humanities, and Culture; (2) Business and Communication; (3) Education, Civic Leadership, and Social Change; (4) Health and Medical Humanities; and (5) Science and Technology.

As figure 2 depicts, majors continue to exist in the New Liberal Arts, but they no longer stand apart from other majors.

consider the core to be the “broccoli curriculum.... It looks nice, and may be good for you, but nobody wants to eat it” (Craig 2018, ¶ 14). If I continue with Mehaffy’s food metaphor to represent the faculty’s involvement with the core, a potluck smorgasbord immediately comes to mind. On campuses like mine, it is plausible for faculty to prepare any number of specialty courses based on their professional and research interests and offer them up at an ever-expanding table. Hiram’s core table is crowded with courses, but whether this ensures that students will take the balance of courses they need to build healthy minds is sometimes questionable.

Given that core credits typically comprise between 25 and 33 percent of an undergraduate’s requirements, I believe that the core should be directly relevant to a student’s career and/or personal interests and that courses within the core should tie together in a purposeful way. In fact, when I reflect on the Carnegie Classification discussion included earlier in this article, I am willing to make a rather bold suggestion: perhaps it is a demonstrably rigorous, broad, and simultaneously connected, engaging, and relevant core rather than the number of graduates in conventional liberal arts disciplines that should carry the most weight in classifying an institution as a liberal arts college.

With those ideas in mind, my team and I are working with faculty to overhaul (in one year or less) Hiram’s existing core in which students take a course from eight epistemological areas: creative methods (CM), interpretive methods (IM), modeling methods (MM), experimental scientific methods (SM), social and cultural analysis (CA), experiencing the world (EW), understanding diversity at home (UD), and ethics and social responsibility (ES).

Unfortunately, too many Hiram students see the existing core courses as “alphabet soup” requirements that they must begrudgingly check off. Like at other places, our core has largely become a vehicle for

students to take a smattering of discreet and non-individualized courses, generally at the introductory level. As such, these courses summarize fairly basic disciplinary perspectives, methodologies, and problem-solving techniques. There is no structural thread that coherently links together a full third of the courses Hiram students take or that ties them to matters of individual interest. Therefore, we are designing the New Liberal Arts model to structure a more coherent, relevant, and personalized core.

To garner students’ interest and help them see how different disciplines shed critical light on the same topic, the New Liberal Arts requires students to choose a set of interconnected core courses that addresses a complex, real-world challenge or opportunity. We are entertaining topics such as environment and climate change; technology and artificial intelligence; the international market economy; and the life well lived.

We imagine that these challenges/opportunities will change every four or five years. While they are in play, however, professors from all majors will be expected to integrate one or more of them into existing courses. They will also create or redesign some departmental core courses or modules to address one or more of the four challenges/opportunities proposed above.

Ideally, by having students choose a challenge or opportunity of interest to them and then choose core courses through which to examine it, the New Liberal Arts should elevate the core and make it more interesting, personalized, and relevant to each student. We hope that students will no longer see the core as “the required stuff,” unrelated to their major, that they have to plow through to get to the “good stuff” in their major. We expect them to see the core as a purposeful cluster of courses that helps them examine a challenge or opportunity of personal interest and map out ways they could realistically work to remedy or leverage it.

» *The Experiential Activity.* As is increasingly the case at other liberal arts colleges and universities, Hiram College guarantees that students are provided real and rich opportunities to apply theory to practice as part of a real-world experience. To ensure that all students participate in an out-of-classroom, high-impact activity, Hiram instituted, as introduced above, Hiram Connect in 2015.

As mentioned earlier, Hiram Connect ensures that freshmen participate in the FYE program. It also requires second-year students to write a reflective essay that describes why they wish to declare their chosen major. They then present the essay to their advisor and have a face-to-face conversation with faculty in the intended area of study before their “declaration” takes hold.

As part of the New Liberal Arts, Hiram Connect will, ideally, enhance the learning that upper-class students glean from the newly required high-impact, experiential activity (e.g., study-away trip, internship, service learning or research project). As part of the New Liberal Arts, it will not be enough that students merely complete their chosen out-of-classroom activity. They will also need to examine the Five Cs that shaped the FYE through the lens of their experiential activity.

Finally, the New Liberal Arts will incorporate these same Five Cs into an increasingly experiential capstone course that all students take as one of the last courses in the major. While the capstone course is required for all majors, it has been a highly experiential project in only some majors. As part of the New Liberal Arts, faculty will soon be encouraged (as described below) to weave a design thinking or systems thinking expectation into the capstone assignment.

In sum, if we use the New Liberal Arts to more tightly couple the experiential and reflection features of the relatively new Hiram Connect, then these experiences can be some of the most powerfully transformative of a student’s undergraduate

career. But the reflection component must be strong enough to illuminate and fasten the experiential and capstone pieces together and adequately robust and fine-tuned to make sure that Hiram Connect’s high-impact activities are linked directly to the major and to the new tightly threaded core.

To help students hone and develop such valuable reflection skills, we are teaching them to bring their reflective journals to life by using the mobile devices that have now been issued. At Hiram, the iPad is not simply about mobile technology; it is also about mindful technology as I will explain next.

THE HOW OF THE NEW LIBERAL ARTS: MINDFUL TECHNOLOGY

As described above, as part of Hiram’s systemic change, we have set out to reconfigure each of the elements of the baccalaureate degree. Those changes alone are substantial and impactful, but in designing the New Liberal Arts, we did not stop there. The model also prompts faculty to rethink *how* they deliver content.

Just last year, faculty started to make major changes in the content delivery of many of their courses. These modifications were catalyzed by Hiram’s 1:1 mobile technology program that equips all students with an iPad Pro, smart pencil, keyboard bundle, and pair of hiking boots. Dubbed “Tech and Trek,” the program fuels classroom and out-of-classroom learning by teaching students to critically and creatively use their devices to navigate the many exciting treks they take during their undergraduate journey. It also teaches students when and where to use technology and when to put it down: to be present without it.

Thanks to Tech and Trek, Hiram has become the first four-year college in Ohio with a 1:1 technology program and the only place in the country where mobile technology has met “mindful technology” (Varlotta 2017a, b, c). Whether they are roaming through the historic 19th-century Hiram Village, hiking the trails at our 550-acre Field Station, trudging

through streams and marshes collecting research samples, embarking on study-away trips, or gaining work experience at one of our many internship sites, students are taught how to use the devices to capture and connect the ideas, feelings, images, and questions they wish to ponder and share with others. As part of mindful practice, Hiram expects students to develop a purposeful, rather than perfunctory, use of 21st-century technology.

Though new at this, faculty have come together to discuss using mobile technology to expand and more radically reconfigure the “flipped classroom,” student group work, hands-on assignments, and the like in order to

- » Transform their classroom teaching from “sage on the stage” to “mentor in the middle” as the iPad frees them from the audio/visual panel at the front of the classroom;
- » Enhance opportunities for learner-learner and learner-instructor collaboration, in and out of class, since all learners have the same device and the same apps;
- » Web conference with content experts no matter where they live or work;
- » Guide students in the mindful use of social networking tools by evaluating perspectives of students, teachers, and leaders within or beyond the confines of their own community;
- » Curate or create interactive e-books—with embedded media and quizzes—that can be annotated or highlighted by viewers;
- » Integrate simulation tools so students can model or manipulate physical or social phenomena;
- » Create and share expressive visual projects using music, theater, and art;
- » Select presentation apps that balance graphics, text, and multimedia;

- » Incorporate real-time formative assessments via apps to discern comprehension of material and encourage engagement;
- » Model tech-life balance with intentional non-tech-use moments and experiences;
- » Guide student development of digital portfolios to capture project work and 21st-century skills; and
- » Bridge the physical and digital worlds with augmented reality tools.

Such use of technology enlivens classroom learning by challenging students to synthesize personal perspectives, interdisciplinary textbook theories and methodologies, and experiential learning. In doing so, it elevates integrated learning, sharpening the very skills thought to be diminished through a perfunctory use of technology. Indeed, Tech and Trek will help students develop the real-world and real-time skills of oral and visual communication, teamwork, problem solving, critical thinking, and civil discourse that employers value so much.

As faculty integrate mobile technology into their courses, they are increasingly instructing students on how to use their mobile devices and the web to root out fact from fiction and real news from fake news. This entails making sure students can differentiate corroborating evidence from opinions and non-substantiated claims. Access to information is no longer a stumbling block for undergraduate researchers, but sorting through infinite sources to find those that are highly reliable and valid is a skill that must be honed.

Along these lines, a recent keynote address from technologist Alan November urged faculty and staff to make sure they had a basic understanding of how search algorithms operate. During our inaugural Tech and Trek Conference (Collier 2018), Alan argued that faculty must know and be able to explain to their students how the search function itself is configured or, perhaps more accurately, “manipulated and

constrained” by platform algorithms that shape the actual content delivered to our devices. Students must understand how and why certain electronically targeted “pieces and parts” of a topic will pop up on a search they personally conduct versus what pops up on a search conducted by another classmate or the instructor. Additionally, students must be taught how and why they need to sift through those pieces and parts to get to the original source materials that are often the most important ones to access (November 2018).

Mobile technology is also enhancing the out-of-classroom treks Hiram students take. Study-abroad travelers, for instance, memorialize the trip of a lifetime by morphing written journals into multimedia ones, complete with photography, videography, interviews, and handwritten annotations made with their smart pencil. Students use location-aware search apps to get on-the-spot information about their locales. And rather than buy an international SIM card to tell folks back home what they are doing, student travelers are creating wikis and blogs to publish and share their personal stories.

iPad-powered experiences are now commonplace for those engaged in service learning projects, internships, and clinicals as well. Students are using devices to record oral histories of hospice patients, critique their student teaching or patient interview skills, and make short videos describing disease transmission. Faculty overseeing such work can access and assess this remote learning effectively and efficiently.

THE WHY OF THE NEW LIBERAL ARTS: A MORE CONTEMPORARY, RELEVANT, AND USEFUL SKILL SET AND MIND-SET

I imagine that all presidents of liberal arts colleges want their students to be well read and well rounded, but we endeavor to have the New Liberal Arts do much more than that. We expect this model to prepare students to become intellectually agile and socially responsible thinkers *and*

doers. To become that type of person, we know our students must be able to demonstrate a contemporary skill set and mind-set that prepares them not only for a satisfying life but, unabashedly, for a successful and ever-changing career. To be clear: viable and relevant 21st-century, tuition-driven liberal arts colleges must focus as much on the “doing” as on the “thinking” and “talking.” Abstract and conceptual thinking should not subjugate applied work. Indeed, the New Liberal Arts is grounded by the assumption that thinking and doing are equally important.

Consider one example of the thinking and doing integration. Having students log in service hours as part of a course and privately record their thoughts and observations in a service journal reviewed by the instructor is not nearly as impactful an experience as it could be. To make this experience more educationally and personally meaningful and more impactful for all, students should not only think or reflect on the situation at hand. They should be expected to *do* something about the situation that made their service necessary.

In this example, perhaps students create a multimedia journal that is shared not only with classmates and the instructor, but also with the service site leader and the people who received the direct service. Learning how to produce work for an audience that is multi-variant versus monolithic is invaluable in an age in which work can be produced, reproduced, and disseminated at the push of a button. Students may also be assigned to not only summarize and analyze the situation to which they were responding, but also unearth, analyze, and contextualize the precipitating causes and/or the broader subtext associated with the surface “issue.” Finally, they should propose and test possible solutions to the situation.

To do all of this, the New Liberal Arts must add new skills (italicized below) to augment, not abandon, the coveted skills of the past. The 21st-century skill set and mind-set requires

- » Analytical and critical thinking skills
- » Written, oral, and *digital* communication skills

- » Computational skills
- » Intercultural and diversity skills
- » *Mindful technology* skills
- » *Systems/design thinking* skills
- » Teamwork and team building skills

Several of the aforementioned skills need little clarification. But since many of us have just started to include systems and design thinking as essential liberal arts skills, I will briefly explain what we expect them to look like at Hiram.

At its basic level, systems thinking focuses more on the construction of the whole than the deconstruction of its parts. Rather than approach decision making by breaking the organization into parts and analyzing each separately, systems thinkers examine the interactions of the people and parts to explore the larger patterns. According to Shawn Grimsley (n.d.), when students can identify the patterns, they can construct a deeper understanding of the system or organization. If the pattern is good for the organization, leaders can make decisions that reinforce it, but if the pattern is bad for the organization, they should make decisions that change the pattern.

Similarly, I have found Linda Naiman's definition of design thinking to be helpful. She sees it as a methodology to solve complex problems and find viable solutions for a particular audience. She adds that design thinking as a mind-set "is not problem-focused, it's solution focused and action oriented towards creating a preferred future. Design Thinking draws upon logic, imagination, intuition, and systemic reasoning, to explore possibilities of what could be—and to create desired outcomes that benefit the end user" (Naiman, n.d., ¶ 7).

Aligned with these definitions, the New Liberal Arts will structure opportunities for students to practice being constructive doers. These opportunities will link thinking, doing, and reflection so that students can

- » Analyze a problem or situation through various academic lenses to ensure an interdisciplinary examination.
- » Present and test their proposed remedies or ideas with audiences outside the academy.
- » Refine final recommendations based on the feedback they heard.
- » Capture the experience itself and the related analysis, problem solving, testing, and refining via a multimedia reflective presentation.

As we move further into our implementation, we are contemplating having students demonstrate acquisition of the delineated skills and mind-set through "endorsements" or "badges" they earn in individual classes, high-impact programs, and cocurricular activities. We are also determining how these skills will be formally assessed. At the present time, some faculty are wondering if the capstone project that is now required of all students could be evaluated on a rubric that includes (among other criteria) the skills delineated above.

CONCLUSION

At most colleges and universities, an overhaul of the FYE, a change in the core, the reconfiguring of majors, or the addition of a high-impact, experiential learning requirement would be drastic on its own. But at Hiram we are making simultaneous changes to all of them and the ways in which each are delivered at warp speed. And, at the same time and the same pace, we are formulating a new set of 21st-century outcomes we expect students to achieve. If those intended changes are not dramatic and comprehensive enough, we are also striving to expand the "who" of Hiram by attracting students from higher socioeconomic means and even broader demographic and geographic pools.

So, despite the fact that change has been a constant part of Hiram's DNA, change of this magnitude and speed is not a natural phenomenon at most colleges. For this reason, it should not sound surprising that while some faculty and staff have been invigorated by such disruptive change, others have been anxious and even dismayed. Therefore, despite the participatory and inclusive nature of the process, I do not want to paint a picture of uniform agreement at each juncture. There were times when a number of stakeholders, for the most part a group of respected and vocal faculty, disagreed with some of the decisions that were unfolding.

The main reason for the discord is that this particular redesign entailed the shrinking, merging, and cutting of a few academic programs and six faculty positions, including two tenured ones, associated with them. Given longstanding norms in higher education, Hiram, like other places, had a group of faculty who were opposed to making cuts—especially those scheduled to occur in short order—to academic programs or faculty positions. This group stated that if any such cuts needed to be made, administrators should make them through natural attrition (retirements and resignations) rather than through targeted downsizing. This same group questioned the legitimacy of cutting several traditional programs at the very same time we were expecting to add a few new ones. They perceived it to be the case, and accurately so, that the “balance” of conventional liberal arts offerings and applied programs would tilt toward the latter. While this group imagined the readjustment to be problematic, others viewed it as highly promising.

As we have done all along and will continue to do, we are keeping our foot on the gas and the brake at the same time. This means there are times when our ride is a bumpy and difficult one. But I believe we are steering the college in the right direction and headed toward a much more exciting and viable place than we are today. And, thankfully, a fairly large group of faculty, the entire Board of Trustees, the overwhelming majority of alumni, the Student Senate, the Staff Assembly, and all major donors agree.

I hope that any college or university president who is similarly called to reconfigure the most coveted components of the college experience can do so as I did: aided by the insights and expertise of a fully supportive cabinet, especially the senior academic officer; key faculty, including the faculty chair; the entire Board of Trustees; and trusted colleagues who have done this hard, but necessary, work elsewhere. Even with this type of support, systemic change is difficult, non-linear, and physically and emotionally tiring for all members of a campus community. Anyone who is called to lead such change must be guided, first and foremost, by the values that make good leaders decent human beings: kindness and empathy. Granted, a change agent will need to rely on attributes beyond these, but starting with the human values we hold most dear is the perfect place to begin the arduous work ahead.

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