
CIC Online Learning Collaboration: A Vision and Framework

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Overview:

The main drivers of innovation in higher education are not simply a function of what is technologically possible; they are—or should be—a function of pedagogically sound and cost-effective strategies that advance our institutional missions in ways that best serve our students, are fair to our faculty, and advance the interests of our communities. The ability to project a course online such that hundreds, thousands, or hundreds of thousands can tune in is not, in and of itself, a means for extending educational opportunity to millions of potential “students.” To effectively provide the highest quality educational opportunity to all learners—distant and residential—we need to enlist the best minds at our universities to fundamentally rethink teaching and learning; analyze the needs and learning styles of the many constituencies we serve; provide for the responsible stewardship of institutional resources; develop appropriate metrics for assessment; and articulate an overarching vision of the future of higher education.

While new and cost effective technological capabilities make certain changes in higher education possible, it does not necessarily follow that such changes are desirable, or would be endorsed or utilized by our existing students, faculty, or community members. Nor does it mean that we fully grasp the costs and business models that might surround new strategies for broadly disseminating course content. University leaders committed to addressing the new opportunities in higher education need to recognize that the primary basis for motivating and inspiring faculty to engage these opportunities will not be the technologies themselves, but rather, the fundamental academic values and pedagogical principles that need to be infused in these emerging instructional technologies. For these reasons, we believe that the chief academic officers of our CIC member universities are in the best position—individually and collectively—to be leading these efforts.

Provost Engagement:

To affirm their interest and leadership in the campus deployment of emerging instructional strategies, the CIC Provosts concur that any adoption or development of new pedagogical methods should be informed by the principles of the highest quality of teaching, learning and research, and that this commitment to instructional quality inform both the development of individual campus strategies as well as any collective efforts undertaken by the CIC institutions working in concert. To move this dialog forward, the Provosts propose the following exploratory efforts to conceive, deploy and assess online instruction across a group of participating CIC Universities:

1. *A project to transition a targeted set of less commonly taught languages to a robust online environment, delivering the courses both within the CIC and*



externally to partners in high-quality liberal arts colleges or peer research universities.

- 2. Development of tools and strategies to cooperatively aid faculty in the establishment and adoption of new and effective modes of instruction. A coordinated approach to developing and integrating learning analytics into course delivery could be a start in this area.*
- 3. Consideration of a coordinated platform for the development and delivery of online or blended courses for a subset of interested CIC universities.*

Collaborative Advancement:

For more than 55 years, the CIC universities, through the leadership of their Chief Academic Officers, have worked together to advance the academic missions of the member campuses. Together, they have moved from providing a forum for discussing issues of the day to a strategic partnership that nurtures change and innovation among CIC members, and higher education at large. The past decade has been highlighted by foundational CIC collaborations working at both scale and speed, including large-scale collaborations in fiber optic networking, library digitization and shared print collections, as well as creative leadership by member universities in online learning. For example, CIC universities collectively deliver over 112 online master's degrees, account for over 16% of all MOOCs offered by Coursera, and have been sharing over 50 less commonly taught language courses to nearly 800 students from a distance. These initiatives, along with over a half-century of developing deep and trusting relationships, have established the foundation of success upon which they can now build to help all CIC members collaboratively and boldly shape the research and instructional university of the future.

At the December 2, 2012 meeting of the CIC Provosts, it was agreed that the Provosts would identify and examine potentially high value, transformative collaborative opportunities emerging from the various CIC stakeholder groups. As a result of the exercise, the Provosts agreed to depute an ad hoc committee of Provosts to explore collaborative opportunities involving online learning. Provost volunteers for this committee include Adesida (Illinois), Robel (Indiana), and Alutto (Ohio State). This report summarizes the Provosts' visioning related to online learning, the ad hoc Committee's guiding considerations and principles, and recommendations for moving forward.

CIC Provosts' Visioning Related to an Online Learning Collaboration:

1. By an overwhelming majority, the Provosts identified collaboration of online learning as an opportunity that would be of high value to their universities.
2. The Provosts also recognize and agree with the Liberal Arts and Sciences Deans that the extension and enhancement of the CourseShare approach, which has primarily involved the sharing of less commonly taught languages synchronously via videoconferencing, is a logical and attractive near-term goal for beginning to collaborate at scale.



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3. Many Provosts, Liberal Arts and Sciences Deans, and other academic leaders were adamant that collaborative opportunities involving online learning extend far beyond languages and that the CIC should pursue a bigger and bolder vision together related to online learning.

Guiding Considerations and Principles:

The cost of higher education is rising faster than any other sector of the economy, including healthcare costs. Student indebtedness is growing. Financial aid tends to be targeted to the most needy, which leaves a large number of middle-class students with fewer opportunities to find support. Time to degree completion is lengthening, resulting in additional costs and longer delays before students can join the work force. The United States ranked 14th among 37 Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and G20 countries in higher education attainment (in 2012). President Obama has made improving this ranking a national priority. For the nation as a whole, but particularly for the leaders of our public universities, this is a call to conscience.

Self-interest and survival are factors as well. Former University of Michigan President James Duderstadt (2011) notes that the fastest growing demographic groups, in terms of future demand for higher education, are just those groups who, as a whole, are underperforming and underserved by universities today. Helping to find new ways to reach these students and provide them with pathways to success is both a demand of social equity and a strategy for institutional survival.

Taken together, these considerations challenge the traditional models of student recruitment, financial aid, and instructional support that universities, especially elite universities, have taken for granted. Meanwhile, state legislatures are taking a greater interest in the rising costs of public higher education. New technologies offer a range of possibilities for teaching students at lower cost; for providing access to courses through more flexible scheduling that can improve time to completion; for expanding and improving Advanced Placement (AP) course availability; and for providing educational opportunities to students who are employed and/or who cannot afford to come to campus.

In addition to these considerations, the following principles should guide any potential CIC initiative:

- Ensure clarity about the purpose of the collaboration, including:
 - Developing more effective and engaging online teaching and learning, through collaborative action and analysis
 - Promoting the reputation of CIC and its member schools
 - Enabling future federation of courses by adopting standards for course development and delivery
 - Realizing efficiencies by co-developing courses and sharing faculty development tools when appropriate
 - Learning more about how to collaborate together at scale
- Acknowledge that an online learning collaboration will likely involve:
 - A strong, long-term institutional commitment



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- A sizable investment by member schools
 - Online learning as well as blended residential learning experiences
 - Leadership of Provosts and Deans to “change the way it has always been done”
 - Partnership with an entity with broad experience in online learning and/or funding agency
 - Mitigate potential risks by:
 - Addressing intellectual property and revenue sharing in a reasonable and equitable way
 - Avoiding competition with individual CIC schools
 - Staffing and funding the collaboration in a sustainable manner

On the Matter of Pedagogical Efficacy:

For those who have taught online, the notion that online teaching is a second-best substitute for “real” teaching (i.e., face-to-face classroom teaching) is being challenged and refuted. Some faculty members report that their online classes have been among the most exciting and creative teaching experiences of their careers. Many said it has reinvigorated their instruction, encouraging innovative strategies for reaching and teaching students. These new practices are most often based on proven pedagogical strategies in the traditional classroom, but adapted to today’s new channels for delivering information. Across the curriculum, the dichotomy between “traditional” and “online” offerings is breaking down, as a continuum of “blended” possibilities increasingly becomes the instructional norm across our campuses. Many faculty and many students are finding enrichment in this period of rapid instructional innovation.

While not everyone has embraced the movement toward increased online learning, there is no conceptual or empirical data to support the contention that online classes lag in quality relative to the traditional classroom experience. It is more accurate to say that online classes have advantages and disadvantages, just as is the case for regular classroom instruction, and that these advantages and disadvantages play out in different ways for different subjects, and for different kinds of students. The question “Which is better?” is oversimplified. There are several dimensions along which these two modalities of teaching can be compared: student learning outcomes, motivation, engagement, satisfaction, confidence, social interaction, and so on; and these questions vary across different pedagogical approaches, and likely vary for students with different backgrounds, readiness, educational experiences and learning styles.

Technological reform in higher education ought to be seen as an occasion for rethinking teaching and learning, for examining and questioning entrenched ways of doing things, and for trying out new ideas and approaches. The driver must be high quality teaching and learning, regardless of the mode of delivery. An underemphasized dimension of learning technologies, from course management systems to MOOCs, is the potential to collect large amounts of data about what students do in courses, what they learn, and where they encounter difficulty. There are unprecedented opportunities to do systematic research on our teaching and student learning, and to use that knowledge to change and improve instruction. In short, this is bringing our approaches to instruction under the same ethos of



systematic inquiry that extends across most other segments of the research university as a knowledge enterprise—something we have never really done before.

One promising approach is called, among other names, “adaptive instruction.” This means combining active, continuous data collection with powerful analytics to provide both instructors and students with real time feedback about where they are succeeding and where they could be doing better. For the teacher, adaptive instruction means that important information is provided about where students are mastering content and where they are falling behind, alerting the instructor of the need to adjust their teaching and the curriculum to optimize student success. For students, this means they’ll receive accurate and continuous feedback about their own strengths and weaknesses, a crucial aspect of metacognition, which is strongly associated with academic success. In some models of adaptive instruction, as in some online learning programs, the learning environment itself “learns” and adapts to individual student needs and learning styles. The result is a customized learning experience that adjusts to the strengths and weaknesses of each student, improving their chances of success.

The wider context of all of this is a focus on student learning and an attempt to identify and measure learning outcomes across a broad range of courses and disciplines. This means not only a philosophical shift of attitude from “What do I want to teach?” to “What do I want my students to learn?” It also means a shift of accountability toward promoting student learning and collecting systematic data about whether or not our teachers and students are succeeding—together. There are implications here for how we evaluate the quality of instruction within the institution, as well as how we respond to external demands from a variety of constituencies (including our students and their parents) to better document what students are learning from their coursework and degrees.

Questions for Next Steps:

In order for the Provosts to agree to explore working in concert in the area of online, blended, and technology-supported learning, we believe that the following questions should be addressed:

1. How would we structure consortial action that draws upon the excellence of CIC schools that includes, in particular, the strengths of our nation’s best land-grant schools and the constituencies they serve?
2. What are the opportunities and limitations of CIC universities affiliating with extramural (non-CIC) initiatives to gain national visibility and status?
3. Can there be a nationally and globally visible CIC consortium for innovation and excellence in online and blended education—one that collaborates through shared courses that benefit students at member institutions, internally, and which collectively offers, and certifies, a world-class suite of courses and degree options available to students externally?
4. Do CIC members need to contract with external partners to provide technology platforms and support, or could a CIC consortium develop and share the costs of



technologies and services that can support the range of types of courses and programs among partner schools?

5. How can the CIC schools be proactive, in creating the next new innovations in teaching and learning, rather than reactive to innovations developed elsewhere?
6. How can CIC schools also collaborate through course sharing to support degree programs that are housed within particular schools but draw from course offerings offered at others? How can this “best of the best” element enhance the quality and popularity of those programs?
7. How can CIC schools do more to collaborate in large-scale research projects that use student learning data to advance our understandings of how students master certain skills and content—and where they encounter problems? For example, such studies might compare alternative instructional approaches in similar courses at different schools.
8. How can CIC do more to jointly develop and offer professional development opportunities that share research, course design principles, and other best practices to improve technology-supported instruction in both regular classrooms and in fully online or blended courses? Do these need to be reinvented at each institution, or can they be usefully shared?

Summary:

New technologies and course redesign present higher education, in general, with an opportunity to improve instructional quality, enhance student learning outcomes, and extend the reach of campus instructional offerings. All of these would be welcome advances, but their accomplishment is not simply a matter of pouring existing course content into a new delivery system.

To meet our objective of using online platforms to improve instructional quality, we need to harness campus creativity and expertise to rethink the underlying methods and aims of instruction; to experiment with new pedagogical approaches that change the ways students interact with instructors and each other; to create new kinds of student projects and tools for assessment; and to foster new modes of collaboration in order to enrich student learning.

The enormous “buzz”—both positive and negative—that is accompanying recent technology developments from other well-known higher education institutions should not distract from the much greater experience and expertise of CIC schools that have been doing high quality and innovative online education for 15 years or more. With provostial leadership, we believe that the CIC universities are well positioned to become a national model for quality online instruction offered by top-tier research universities.

References:

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The Committee on Institutional Cooperation is an academic consortium of top-tier research universities, including members of the Big Ten and the University of Chicago. For over half a century, CIC members have collaborated to advance their academic missions, generate unique opportunities for students and faculty, and serve the common good by sharing expertise, leveraging campus resources, and collaborating on innovative programs.

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