

Strategic Planning: Innovation Sub-Committee
Concept Paper

INNOVATION

Within a context of rapid academic and pedagogical evolutions, and in a business model that is increasingly difficult for small, private colleges, the overarching priority of this section of the strategic plan is to articulate the two innovative tracks that the College will follow in the next three years: reorganization and novel practices to build and strengthen capacity and improve the student experience, and truly leading-edge initiatives to recruit students and enhance our profile.

Summary

Academic disciplines, pedagogical methods, and the business model of higher education have all been changing. Rapid transformations in the latter, especially, are posing increasing threats to small, private institutions like Elms College. In the next three years, Elms College must adopt practices that may not be innovative for the world but that are novel for the College in order to maintain our competitiveness. At the same time, Elms College has developed truly cutting-edge initiatives in recent years, which the College must promote vigorously to attract students and enhance our profile. Thus, Elms College seeks innovative new ways to grow and support the Elms community by blending innovation, capacity-building, and reorganization. Innovation will focus on two areas: A) Initiatives that are innovative for Elms and improve teaching and learning, operations, and the student experience; and B) Initiatives that are innovative in higher education. As a result of the innovation areas of focus, in the first category, Elms College will 1) strengthen high-quality online learning to grow enrollment, support; 2) re-evaluate organizational structure and best practices to bolster employee/student support, success and retention; and 3) leverage technology and best practices to respond to student needs for an efficient and supportive learning environment. In the second category, Elms College will 4) grow the Center for Equity in Urban Education (CEUE); and 5) expand the Western Massachusetts Literacy Collaborative (WMLC).

A. Innovative Initiatives for Elms College: Areas of Focus

Area of Focus #1: Strengthen high-quality online teaching and learning

Instructional Designer: Given the increase in online enrollment and demand, with the number of fully online program students growing by 36% over the past three years, it is imperative to enhance our online technology and pedagogy. To ensure that the quality of education remains consistent across both online and in-person platforms, faculty need assistance in developing high-quality online courses that are informative and engaging, as well as help in online assessment methods in this new age of generative Artificial Intelligence (AI). Elms College will expand our one-person Educational Technology Specialist office into a virtual Online Learning Center with the addition of an Instructional Designer who can assist faculty with digital skills and creative strategies for Strengthening Online Learning and Engagement (SOLE). By providing faculty with the necessary support, resources, and opportunities for professional development, we can empower them to develop content-aligned courses that effectively embed access to

support resources and actively engage students. These additions will also be helpful in strategizing continuity for all online courses and programs across the disciplines to ensure that Elms College provides a consistent, high-quality learning environment.

In order to improve and assess our online courses, Elms College will seek training for the Online Learning Center staff and lead faculty with the Quality Matters organization (<https://www.qualitymatters.org/>). Quality Matters (QM) includes professional development, rubrics and standards for online classes that are based on research, and a peer-based review process to certify the quality of online courses. It provides a framework for evaluating the effectiveness of course design in promoting student engagement, interaction, and learning outcomes. We will use QM standards to build our own capacity to review and ensure alignment with best practices in online education. Online faculty champions will assist with the peer-review process. Mini-grants will incentivize faculty to work with the instructional designer and a faculty peer mentor to revise their online courses to meet QM standards.

Faculty and Staff Development: With the continued growth of technology and online products, it is important that Elms College continues to support the education of its faculty to better utilize the teaching technology available. Inclusion of faculty development days within the academic year will be vital to keep faculty abreast of new technologies, communication, and implementation of technology advancements.

With the Quality Matters (QM) training, the Online Learning Center will work with faculty peer mentors to design in-house professional development once a semester, guides, and quality assessments for online courses. We will also establish a feedback and evaluation process where faculty can receive constructive feedback on their online courses from students, faculty peers, and an instructional designer. This helps faculty continuously improve and refine their courses to enhance quality and engagement. A faculty peer mentoring program can serve as a resource and faculty mini grants can provide incentives for the development of high-quality online courses. An annual showcase of online courses developed with the faculty mini grants can help disseminate innovative teaching practices and highlight exemplary course designs. This strategic investment will foster faculty-driven innovation in online education and build an online teaching community that fosters a culture of continuous improvement and promotes excellence in online teaching and learning at Elms College.

The importance of technology training for supportive staff and administrative assistants cannot be overlooked. Administrative assistants would also be able to assist faculty in their divisions with technology support. Structured faculty, staff, and administration professional development days scheduled within the Academic Calendar tied to technology, online course teaching, online student support, development of student sense of belonging in a virtual setting, and continued LMS support are all important.

Area of Focus #2: Re-evaluate organizational structure and best practices to bolster employee/student support, success, and retention

Meet the mental health needs of students: While Elms College currently offers students access to mental health resources, overall data shows that mental health needs have greatly expanded. Elms College will expand what is presently offered to ensure the mental health resources meet the needs of an increasingly diverse Elms population. Activities will include:

- augmenting Elms College’s current mental health support with outside resources that ensure culturally responsive (bilingual) student services and resource offerings.
- improvement of timely communication between the counseling services and students/staff/faculty to increase awareness of the supportive services Elms currently offers, including workshops, events, and resources exploration and adaptation of telehealth for counseling services for all Elms students.

Develop a financial “One Stop Shop” for students – Integration of Financial Aid and Student Accounts: About 98% of Elms College undergraduates receive some type of financial aid. In the fall 2022 cohort, PELL recipients had a 60% retention rate in comparison to 81% for non-PELL students, further highlighting the need for additional financial support and care. A “One Stop Shop” for student financial services would streamline the financial needs for students handling both financial aid as well as student accounts.

Increase student space to build a sense of belonging: The sense of belonging on a college campus has always been important. But now, with the increase in technology and online service options, it has become even more so. While we have options available to students and the community, it is critical that each student feels like they BELONG to the Elms Campus and a part of the Elms community.

Elms College will seek to develop a space where students can find food offerings on weekends and late nights, a comfortable meeting location with perhaps a coffee/snack shop, and a safe space to socialize, engage, and create community. This created space should be on campus for commuter students/residential students to commune together. This space could also offer space for studying and an alternative for study groups to utilize, especially for the commuting and off-campus students.

Re-evaluate organizational structure and opportunities for efficiency: Enrollment challenges continue to create increased pressures on Elms College’s revenues. As a result, Elms College must size our expenses and cost structure correspondingly, limiting the College’s ability to increase staffing. Nonetheless, the College must maintain a competitive level of service to our students. Therefore, the College must have the right people, doing the right thing, at the right time. As an organization we must review and identify opportunities for organizational efficiencies that are not inconsistent with fidelity to our mission, our distinctiveness, or our pursuit of new revenue opportunities. Activities to be undertaken include:

- reviewing the organizational structure, with the purpose of decreasing costs, improving services, or both;
- Seriously identify opportunity for sharing services or expanding course sharing options with other institutions;
- a reexamination of insourcing versus outsourcing services.

Area of Focus #3: Leverage technology and best practices to respond to student needs for an efficient and supportive learning environment.

Provide efficiency in registration and payment for our growing non-degree student population: As the number of online, certificate and non-degree offerings grow, we need the infrastructure to support efficient registration and payment. To be a leader in online and commuter student learning, we need to have easy access to course offerings and seamless enrollment/payment options. The College will pursue creating a “Shopping Cart” feature for course selection and payment for non-degree and professional development offerings.

Increase and improve student support services with a focus on online learners: Our growing number of online students need robust support systems to succeed in their education while juggling jobs, families, and other responsibilities. In order to improve retention and success in our online programs, the College will enhance and provide infrastructure needed for students to be successful via online student support services in tutoring, mentoring, and technical assistance.

B. Innovative Initiatives in Higher Education: Areas of Focus

Area of Focus #4: Grow the Center for Equity in Urban Education (CEUE)

The primary goal of the CEUE is to increase the number and diversity of qualified and licensed educators and school leaders through a focus on three axes: Programs (reimagining academic programs), Partnerships (engaging deeply with a broad range of partners, and Pipeline (grow the pipeline of a diverse and well-prepared workforce).

- *Good progress has been made in these areas, including a total enrollment of 81 students (67 Black and Latino, 14 White) from FA19-SP24. Undergraduate: 31; Graduate: 50. In addition, the percentage of BIPOC students in the Education Division at Elms College has increased from 19% in 2018, before the creation of the Center, to 46% in Spring 2024. The College will reinforce the successes of the CEUE by:*

- leveraging our partnerships to increase enrollment in the three key programs, including an approved master’s in educational leadership;
- seeking additional funding support for the CEUE to, among other things, explore a “grow your own” initiative;
- communicate and promote the successes of the CEUE

Area of Focus #5: Expand the Western Massachusetts Literacy Collaborative (WMLC)

The Western Mass Literacy Collaborative (WMLC), was founded in early 2023 by Elms College, along with American International College, Bay Path University, Westfield State University, and Springfield Public Schools. The WMLC went on to design the Summer Learn & Earn (SLE) Literacy Corps Intervention program that launched in summer 2023.

In its inaugural summer program, 16 college students majoring in education took part in an intensive week-long professional development focused on using culturally responsive evidence-based literacy interventions with diverse PreK-12 student populations, including multilingual and

special education students. The SLE Literacy Corps members were introduced to a research-based, multi-tiered system of support structure for literacy instruction. They were also enrolled in a 3 cr course, *Culturally Responsive Literacy Pedagogy in Urban Settings I*, through Elms College. The SLE's Literacy Corps Teachers were employed by Springfield Schools to provide small group literacy interventions to their students. A culminating event celebrating the learning and work of the teachers and the partnership was held upon the conclusion of summer school. In summer 2024, the WMLC expanded to 36 Literacy Corps Literacy Intervention Teachers and two additional school systems joined: The Springfield Empowerment Zone Partnership (SEZP) and East Longmeadow Public Schools. Funding was received through a MA Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) Early Literacy Collaborative grant that was created based on the innovative work of the WMLC to impact early literacy across the state. Additional funding was received through an SEZP grant from DESE.

To sustain and grow the work of the WMLC, the following is needed:

- Hire a grant- or gift-funded director for the Western Massachusetts Literacy Collaborative to oversee the shared collaborative vision of planning and implementing Early Literacy Programs, using evidence-based literacy methods, to meet the literacy needs of the region through establishing higher education and school system partnerships and building out an assessment model to measure impact.
- Increase the number of school system partners from 3-6, to strengthen early literacy skills throughout the region.
- Grow the number of higher education partners to five, that are focused on culturally responsive structured literacy practices and committed to using high-quality instructional materials for early literacy training.
- Develop an assessment plan to measure the impact of the WMLC SLE on the PreK-12 students being served.
- Continue to communicate and promote the successes of the WMLC.