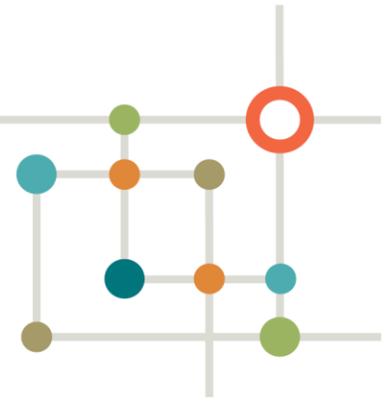


# INNOVATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION



## CASE STUDY: UNITY COLLEGE

Unity, Maine / [www.unity.edu](http://www.unity.edu)

<b>Institutional Type:</b>	Private, liberal arts institution
<b>Institutional Characteristics:</b>	Sustainability science-based with an environmental focus
<b>Location:</b>	Rural campus located on 225 acres in Unity, Maine (pop. 2,134)
<b>Full Time Enrollment:</b>	712 (Fall 2016-17)
<b>Annual Operation Budget:</b>	\$20.3M (Fall 16-17)
<b>Board Size:</b>	21 members

### The Challenge: A Complex Maze of Survival

Unity College is a private liberal arts institution enrolling about 750 students on its campus in Unity, Maine. Known as “America’s Environmental College,” the institution is in the midst of a multi-year venture to redefine the higher education experience Unity offers, creating “the future leaders of the environmental century” and moving from a regional to a nationally-recognized institution.

Unity’s leadership understands the disruptive external and internal forces challenging higher education institutions to make changes in order to thrive in a new normal. As Unity board chair John Newlin writes, “This ‘industry of education’ has become a complex maze of survival for future generations.” For Unity, this maze of survival includes a diminishing pipeline of regional high school graduates, increased competition in the sustainability space, and, like many private institutions, a desire to be less dependent on tuition revenues from its traditional market.

### A Three-Pronged Approach

Responding to these disruptions, Unity is currently implementing a three-pronged approach to innovation: the institution is completing a strategic branding initiative, creating new sources of revenue, and developing a new enterprise-driven organizational model.

In light of the environmental realities of the coming century, the institution is doubling down on its commitment to environmental science and sustainability. Integrating sustainability science into all aspects of its experiential, liberal arts curriculum, Unity aims to develop “holistic, integrative practitioners of sustainability science.” As part of its commitment, the institution has set an ambitious goal of eliminating its carbon footprint completely. It is also proactively seeking out new potential student populations, particularly transfer and non-traditional students, and place-bound students. And it is launching new online graduate programs with a focus on sustainability science as it expands its reach and reputation.

Harnessing entrepreneurial initiatives across campus, Unity has successfully cultivated new revenue in creative ways. A farm gifted to the college in 2011 now hosts a farm stand and horticultural workshops to bring in revenue for the college, in addition to operating as a center for teaching and research. The dining services department uses the produce from the farm in its recipes to cut costs and to create specialty food



products that bring in money for the campus. The college utilizes campus space sustainably and profitably, offering summer programs that garner roughly \$250,000 in revenue and renting out the campus performing arts center to outside groups. Moving into the online market in 2016, the institution launched Unity College Online to offer master's degrees, an MBA, and non-degree credits with a curricular focus in sustainability science. It plans to expand graduate and undergraduate online programs.

Throughout this process, the leadership and governing board of Unity College realized that a nimble organizational structure was important to the long-term success of the college. In June 2017, the board approved changes to the bylaws to implement the Enterprise Model. This model enables the creation of individual strategic education business units (SEBUs) for new initiatives—like Distance Education—while preserving the unique residential liberal arts experience offered at the flagship campus. It establishes separate faculties, staffs, and policies for each SEBU to allow for experimentation and innovation. To ensure sound governance of the new institutional model, the board has changed its own structure and reaffirmed the role of the president in stewarding the implementation of this strategic vision.

## **President Khoury on Innovation**

Below, Unity College President Melik Peter Khoury reflects on the innovative process that has led his institution to rethink and reinvent structure, operations, and mission into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **Q: What motivated Unity College to pursue innovation?**

At Unity College, we believe that small, private higher education plays an incredibly important role in the ecosystem of higher education. And yet higher education, in many ways, has not evolved to respond to the challenges it is currently facing. Student demographics are changing. Learning needs are changing. Social, employer, and market expectations are changing quickly. Higher education, however, remains slow to change.

Our strategic industry and institutional research confirmed several often-contradictory forces at work in a higher education industry in extreme flux. For example, the need for colleges to increase revenue seems to run counter to students' need to keep college costs down and to employers' desires for new employees who can focus on work and not on their debt.

How to address this historically epic collision of college, marketplace, and student forces? How to offer a new way forward for small, private higher education?

The Unity College response is a new approach to higher education we call "Enterprise Education." For example, instead of a sustainable agriculture program having a demonstration plot just outside the classroom, we asked, "Why wouldn't we teach students to run an actual farm? Our own farm. A farm that could grow both student jobs and produce. A farm that raises greens as well as revenue. Why wouldn't we?"

And why wouldn't we support student learning situationally, when students feel the need and are most ready to learn, through online or onsite project management, communication, or math certifications? And, for goodness' sakes, why wouldn't we use the revenue from these sustainable enterprises to help keep tuition at bay? We decided that there is absolutely no reason why not.

We don't want Unity College to be the last small private standing. We hope to provide a model for a new era of flourishing for small, private higher education. Because—disproportionately—many of our nation's



greatest leaders, best ideas, and most important social movements came from the small, private liberal arts experience. We believe in small, private education and we want to see it wholly relevant again. That's all the motivation for innovation that we needed.

### **Q: What challenges did you encounter throughout the process? How did you overcome these challenges?**

The biggest challenges we have encountered so far—and we are by no means where we want to be—have been establishing bandwidth for innovation without overtaxing current faculty and staff; inheriting a limiting organizational structure and board committee structure; and cultural challenges related to institutional silos and traditional higher education pace, workflows, and roles.

For example, analysis of false starts for distance education revealed that, when pressed, faculty and staff naturally prioritized maintenance of the current residential programs over development of the new initiative. By creating and investing in a separate Distance Education Strategic Education Business Unit, we protected residential quality. This also allowed us to develop streamlined program development processes more fitting for the quicker distance education pace and to add faculty and staff with direct distance education experience.

The progress we have made so far at Unity College has really come by challenging ourselves think differently. We are learning to think differently about traditional roles. We have faculty who have really embraced the entrepreneurial spirit and we have staff who are accepting more responsibility for creating the conditions for 24/7 learning.

We are also changing the way we think about revenue and expenses. We have become very transparent about our budgets, sources of revenue, and revenue responsibilities across the institution, and we have stopped insulating departments and individuals from the natural consequences of their actions—good and bad.

Finally, we are challenging ourselves to think differently about how we govern the college—the role of our board members, the structure of board committees, and how shared governance can be an asset to innovation.

### **Q: What was the board's involvement in these institutional initiatives?**

From the beginning, the board was at the heart of the change. The Unity College board of trustees set a bold strategic plan for the college that involved specific expectations to develop the infrastructure necessary to diversify revenue streams and to which we return again and again as we evolve and grow. The board invested in leadership continuity where there had been inconsistency and turnover by remaining committed to the established strategic plan and vision and by tapping me—then executive vice president and CAO—to serve as president when the previous president left. Further, the board then committed to foundational changes in college bylaws and governance documents to increase flexibility and reduce response time to market forces.

### **Q: What did this process teach you about developing a culture of innovation?**

Not very long ago, Unity College had a college innovations committee. It was short-lived, but we discovered quickly that we had no lack of good ideas. It was prioritization, systems, and elbow grease we lacked. Through all the recent development, we haven't talked much until recently about "innovation" *per*



*se.* Instead, without really saying the word “innovation,” it has been bred into every committee, every work unit, every new undertaking. We’ve accomplished this by creating a culture of positive change: embedding return on investment, student success, and industry redesign into hiring expectations, job descriptions, budgeting processes, employee handbooks, and the like.

Honestly, rather than talking “innovation,” we’ve focused more on the step-by-step grind of reaching a particular goal, whether to establish a new campus farm, retail, and research station or changing the bylaws. Higher education is full of innovative thinkers and amazing ideas. The hard part seems to be making decisions, disciplining yourselves to focus on the priorities, then communicating and documenting the step-by-step process.

### **Q: What other lessons did you learn, and what advice would you offer other institutions pursuing innovation?**

As an institution, we learned—we are still learning—that change is hard. Everyone says that, but until you live it as an institution the words don’t mean much. Change and innovation need to become the accepted and welcomed backdrop against which higher education operates. At Unity College, we have just begun to accept and internalize this reality.

We have not “arrived” and would not presume to give advice, but one habit we have found helpful is this: Every time we are tempted to solve a problem with higher education industry “best practice,” we challenge ourselves to do better than “best practice” in an industry that is so important, but is struggling to adapt to the rate of change.

Unity College is an environmental science school. We talk and think a lot about climate change. The real challenge of climate change is that the rate of global change will not slow to match our rate of adaptation. Higher education is like that. Change will outpace us if we don’t relentlessly work to keep up. As much as I recognize the value in taking things more slowly—as much as I would love to give our campus a break from change—as a college and an industry we simply cannot afford it. As a faculty member aptly said after one of my recent campus presentations, “Get busy living or get busy dying.” Or, as I like to say, “No margin, no mission.”



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