

Strategic Action Plan – 2014-2019

Approved by the ACM Board of Directors in November 2014

Table of Contents

[Introduction & Background](#) (pages 1-3)

[Goals, Strategies, & Tactics - New for 2014-2019](#) (pages 3-8)

[Appendix I: ACM Strategic Action Priorities - 2008-2013 & Beyond](#) (pages 9-10)

[Appendix II: Strategic Planning Task Forces](#) (page 11)

[Appendix III: Process to Develop a New Strategic Action Plan - 2014-2019](#) (pages 12-18)

Introduction

Founded in 1958, the Associated Colleges of the Midwest stands proudly as one of the oldest and most successful higher-education consortia in the United States. Composed of fourteen member colleges – ten founding members plus four that have joined since – the ACM has been steadfast in supporting its member colleges across three core purposes articulated at the outset:

1. To advance the interests and contribute to the educational effectiveness of the member colleges;
2. To develop and assist the member colleges in improving the efficiency of their operations both administrative and cultural; and
3. To assist the member colleges in developing additional sources of revenue.

In 2008 the ACM Board of Directors approved its first Strategic Action Plan and a Mission Statement to sharpen the focus of the consortium's work. At that time, the ACM colleges recognized that one of their key assets – outstanding teaching in an environment that privileges student-faculty interaction – could be enhanced through support for collaboration among faculty. They also realized that the existing portfolio of shared off-campus study programs filled an important niche by providing programs tailored for students from liberal arts colleges.

Now six years later, the ACM colleges face new and rapidly changing challenges. Student bodies are more diverse and students at ACM colleges arrive with new needs, interests, and skills, which pose challenges for teaching. At the same time, colleges are pressed by relentless cost pressures that force difficult economic choices with curricular implications. Moreover, the process of making such choices strains systems of shared governance. Finally, new technologies are dramatically changing the possibilities for teaching and research.

In meeting these challenges, the ACM colleges are well-positioned to draw on their long history of successful collaboration through the consortium. Over several months in 2012 and 2013, two Task Forces, comprising faculty and administrative leaders from all fourteen member colleges ([see Appendix II](#)), discussed these challenges and the broader environment in which the colleges

operate. They sought to identify areas where joint activity could benefit the colleges, and to expand on the first strategic plan. One Task Force focused on Leveraging Consortial Accomplishments; the other on New Initiatives. Their analyses, including the rationale for the approach taken in this new Strategic Action Plan, are summarized in [Appendix III](#).

The purpose of this document is to expand on the priorities of the 2008 Strategic Plan in order to provide a guiding framework for strategic initiatives among the ACM colleges so they can fully leverage, through their collaborations, the opportunities and challenges they will face over the next five years.

Background – Vision Statement – Mission Statement – Existing Priorities

The following Vision Statement emerged from the Task Force discussions. It is premised on the ACM's essential role as a vehicle through which the member colleges can collaborate to do things that would be impossible or more difficult to do individually in pursuit of their respective educational missions. In particular, the colleges use the consortium to provide their students, faculty, and staff distinctive, high quality educational programs that are jointly owned and operated, as well as the collective benefit of a shared community of liberal arts institutions. The Vision Statement provides a guide for the ACM's forward-looking priorities, while also identifying the desired long-term impact.

Vision Statement.

The ACM colleges aim to use their consortium to build capacity for positive change on their campuses in order to help faculty and staff stay fresh and current and continue to innovate on behalf of teaching and learning. This in turn will enable them to prepare students for rewarding careers, civic engagement, and meaningful lives.

The 2008 Mission Statement drew on the consortium's history of stated purposes and the colleges' expectation that the consortium serve as a vehicle for the member colleges to enhance the achievement of their educational missions in ways they could not do as well alone. The mission is stated as follows:

Mission Statement. *The Associated Colleges of the Midwest, a consortium of residential liberal arts colleges, aims to strengthen its member colleges as leaders, and exemplars, in liberal arts education through significant, innovative, and sustainable collaborations. The ACM does this by:*

- *Fostering professional effectiveness of faculty and administrative leaders at member colleges;*
- *Providing the members exemplary liberal arts learning through off-campus studies;*
- *Promoting members' excellence in teaching and learning, especially as achieved through collaboration.*

The first Strategic Action Plan ([See Appendix I](#)) aimed to stabilize and strengthen the consortium.

2008 Strategic Action Plan. The Plan adopted four priorities, and these remain in place:

1. *Expand opportunities for professional interaction and development of faculty and administrative leaders.*
2. *Review, revise, and strengthen Off-Campus Study programs.*
3. *Publicize ACM members' leadership in liberal arts education by highlighting their accomplishments, especially those achieved through collaboration.*
4. *Enhance organizational effectiveness.*

The consortium made substantial progress in these four objectives over the past five years, contributing to a sense of stability and strength in the colleges' association. The ACM seeks over the next five years to carry forward and build on these initial objectives by:

- Leveraging the member colleges' existing consortial resources to generate even greater benefit to each college; and
- Using the strengthened consortial infrastructure to take on new and strategic collaborative initiatives through which the colleges could enhance achievement of their mission.

Goals – Strategies – Tactics – New for 2014-2019

Two broad and inter-related goals emerged from the Task Force deliberations. These goals and supporting strategic initiatives address the current and near-term challenges and opportunities the colleges will face. The first builds on consortial accomplishments to enable the colleges to derive greater benefits from existing programs; the second initiates a new line of activity through which the colleges stand to gain significantly. Together they reaffirm the ACM's role as a vehicle for the member colleges to thrive as leaders in liberal arts education. These goals are presented below, with several strategies and related tactics for achieving them over the next five years.

1. **Goal: Enhance, assess and articulate the value of liberal arts education, building connections among on-campus learning, off-campus learning, and students' preparation for life after college.**

- 1.1 **Strategy: Take advantage of—and expand—faculty development programs that support innovative practices, to encourage engagement with students and meet the needs of increasingly diverse student bodies.**

Tactics:

- 1.1.1 Use the existing portfolio of faculty development programs and others yet to be created with new funding, as well as teaching and learning centers to foster

engagement by a larger portion of ACM faculty with new findings in cognitive science and collaborative approaches to innovation.

- Timeline: Continuous, aligned with grant timelines
- Coordinator(s): VP and Director of Faculty Development and Grant Programs (DFDGP)
- Resources: Grant sources
- Metric: Count faculty engaged, by campus and discipline over time

1.1.2 Foster and disseminate discussion and research on issues that concern faculty such as the value of residential education, the future of the humanities, and the pedagogical needs that accompany changing demographics of prospective and current students who study at the ACM colleges.

- Timeline: Continuous with grant timelines
- Coordinator(s): DFDGP
- Resources: New grant sources
- Metric: Count studies and initiatives; track retention of new student populations over time

1.1.3 Take advantage of the consortial faculty site visit program to strengthen the connections between on-campus and off-campus learning.

- Timeline: One each semester
- Coordinator(s): VP and Director of Off-Campus Study (DOCS)
- Resources: Internally generated by program portfolio
- Metric: Changes introduced on site or on campus afterward

1.2 Strategy: Build on and expand the consortial off-campus study programs to excel in the niche of small-enrollment programs for liberal arts students that offer affordability, a variety of opportunities for site-specific learning, independent study, community-based learning, and teaching by local and ACM faculty.

Tactics:

1.2.1 Create new programs, internship opportunities, webinars or other online modules for on-site research methods and other curricular training, and program assessment based on learning outcomes in collaboration with campus faculty, librarians and instructional technologists.

- Timeline: China, India, Brazil, online modules by 2015-16
- Coordinator(s): DOCS
- Resources: Internally generated by programs; grant funds
- Metric: Track schedule of new programs and program components; assess achievement of stated learning outcomes for each

1.2.2 Facilitate the use of consortial program sites by ACM faculty as well as by staff who recruit prospective students in countries such as Brazil, China, and India.

- Timeline: Continuous; Vet admissions use with Admissions Directors in 2014 and plan subsequent years if approved

- Coordinator(s): DOCS, CFO, Director of Publications (Admissions)
- Resources: Campus-generated
- Metric: Track the extent of non-program use of consortial sites by colleges

- 1.2.3 Raise enrollments in consortial off-campus programs to: (a) reduce the cost per student and corresponding prices as part of a larger effort to make programs more affordable for students and their colleges; (b) expand participation, engaging the expertise of campus faculty and staff about the impediments to greater diversity among off-campus study participants; and (c) identify ways to expand participation for traditionally underrepresented groups such as students of color, men, and other students who are least likely to study abroad.
- Timeline: Schedule of annual increments
 - Coordinator(s): Director of Marketing and Recruiting (DMR)
 - Resources: Internally generated resources, with campus partners
 - Metric: Track enrollment changes overall and by non-traditional students

1.3 Strategy: Foster ways to connect faculty, students and staff (especially institutional research, admissions, diversity officers, off-campus studies, career services, and public relations) and OCS program alumni to better understand and articulate the value of liberal arts education, to multiple constituencies.

Tactics:

- 1.3.1 Foster ways for faculty, academic support staff, and program alumni to help students, especially those returning from off-campus study, better understand and articulate what they have learned and how they can use the new knowledge and skills in their studies on campus and in their lives after graduation.
- Timeline: Set annual targets
 - Coordinator(s): DOCS and DMR
 - Resources: Internally generated and campus resources
 - Metric: Count annual increments of new initiatives and participants
- 1.3.2 Develop new ways to showcase student accomplishments and work products, especially in connection with developing students' skills to articulate the new capacities they have gained from a liberal arts education, both on and off campus, and to create e-portfolios.
- Timeline: Develop plan for 3-5 years
 - Coordinator(s): DOCS, Associate DOCS, DMR
 - Resources: Internally generated
 - Metric: Track the number and ways products are showcased
- 1.3.3 Highlight and make the case for residential liberal arts education in web and print materials that describe the consortial programs for students and faculty

(e.g., off-campus study, athletic tournaments, symposia and contests, as well as faculty conferences, projects, and site visits) and make more visible the practical value of liberal arts education.

- Timeline: Continuous, setting annual goals
- Coordinator(s): Director of Publications, DMR, DOCS
- Resources: Internally generated
- Metric: Count number and kinds of stories and publications, especially external coverage of stories

2. Goal: Collaborate to build capacity of ACM faculty and staff to enhance residential liberal arts education by taking advantage of new developments in instructional and other technologies by sharing institutional experience and using scale to improve quality and efficiency, while lowering costs and risks.

2.1 Strategy: Create appropriate academic, financial, administrative, and legal structures to launch and sustain collaborative efforts that employ new technologies and new curricular approaches such as on-line courses, hybrid teaching, and modular programs.

Tactics:

2.1.1 Foster the creation and sharing of online modules and courses through the consortium and member campuses. In so doing, leverage the critical mass of fourteen campuses, 23,000 students, 2,000 faculty, and 1,800 staff – especially librarians and instructional technologists – to achieve scale and jointly document and understand the impacts on student learning, faculty time and work, institutional practices (such as the availability of courses where enrollment on a single campus would be too small to offer), calendars and scheduling, and other administrative matters such as intellectual property issues, legal requirements, and finances.

- Timeline: Targets set annually
- Coordinator(s): DFDGP, Liaison for Technology in Teaching and Learning (LTTL)
- Resources: Grant sources, consortial, and campus resources
- Metric: Count the products and students involved; assess impact on stated learning goals

2.1.1.1. Use new technologies to create webinars or other online modules for pre-OCS program preparation and for students' reentry to campus (e.g., building on structured reflection during programs) as well as broadened opportunities for language study in order to enhance off-campus programs that are operated through the consortium or by individual colleges.

- Timeline: Targets set annually
- Coordinator(s): DOCS, DFDGP
- Resources: Internal and grant sources
- Metric: Count products created; assess learning outcome impact

2.1.1.2. Bring faculty together with instructional technologists and librarians to foster collaboration, take advantage of the many external tools, and manage student expectations, (keeping in mind that faculty time is costly so must be used judiciously).

- Timeline: Targets set annually
- Coordinator(s): DFDGP and LTTL
- Resources: Grant sources; sharing among campuses
- Metric: Count collaborations, products that result

2.2. Strategy: Help colleges and their faculty experiment with and share their learning about digital instruction.

Tactics:

2.2.1. Create and sustain consortium-wide conversations and communication platforms that enable colleges and their faculty, as well as off-campus study program staff, to share technology resources and the learning about these resources – by using the successful approach developed a decade ago by the Midwest Institutional Technology Center (MITC), talking with each campus, reporting back to campuses on priorities and concerns, identifying ways to learn from each other, and helping organize meetings across campuses.

- Timeline: Targets set annually
- Coordinator(s): Presidents, DFDGP, LTTL
- Resources: FaCE grant and consortial contribution after year 3
- Metric: Timing of hiring; feedback from campuses

2.2.2. Create web-based tools to facilitate collaboration among ACM faculty and their colleges, while also fostering professional development opportunities that help colleges and their faculties identify and take steps to develop and use digital, technology-assisted learning and collaboration tools that enhance highly-mentored learning.

- Timeline: Three years; targets set annually
- Coordinator(s): DFDGP, LTTL
- Resources: Grant sources, campuses
- Metric: Count and assess the impact of tools created

2.3. Strategy: Engage external partners to enhance the financial, technological, and reputational impact of collaborations in technology-enabled education.

Tactics

2.3.1. Seek external funding through new relationships with funders such as the Next Generation Learning Challenges (NGLC) and Gates Foundation, developing partnerships to help reduce startup costs for using technology and provide resources that foster faculty experimentation and the development of collaborative structures.

- Timeline: 2014 and subsequent targets set annually
- Coordinator(s): President, DFDGP
- Resources: Internal grant development fund
- Metric: Number and size of grants

2.3.2. Generate data on the links between high-touch classrooms, online learning, and the residential experience at liberal arts colleges and articulate the findings publicly in the media.

- Timeline: Develop annual targets
- Coordinator(s): Director of Publications, DFDGP, President
- Resources: Consortial staff time with campus partners
- Metric: Data gathered from ACM college experiences; Stories generated and placed externally

2.3.3. Explore possibilities for partnerships with universities or the private sector for additional scale, technology, learning, expertise or capital, and learn from other consortia about developing courses for multiple institutions.

- Timeline: Targets set annually
- Coordinator(s): DFDGP, President
- Resources: Grant funding
- Metric: Count new partners, scope of partnerships, impact

Evaluation

Overall outcomes will be tracked and assessed so that leadership and all efforts are focused on achieving the vision. Staff will gather quantitative data as well as qualitative evidence on the extent of progress achieved in the course of actions taken to pursue each strategy and goal. As is the current practice, staff will frame proposals to the Board by making explicit their connection to the Strategic Plan.

Appendix I

ACM Strategic Action Priorities – 2008-2013 and Beyond

1. Expand opportunities for professional interaction and development of faculty and administrative leaders.

1.1 Assess current offerings – *recommend ways to improve overall impact.*

1.2 Expand opportunities to network – *create regular, ongoing and self-sustaining opportunities for peers to interact.*

1.3 Form strategic partnerships – *ally with other organizations where purposes coincide to extend consortial resources.*

2. Review, revise, and strengthen Off-Campus Study programs.

2.1 Clarify the identity and niche for ACM's portfolio of OCS programs – *shape a readily identifiable portfolio of programs that draw upon the core missions, strengths, and needs of its member colleges.*

2.2 Evaluate and update current OCS programs – *bring programs in line with a clear identity for its OCS portfolio.*

2.3 Develop new program opportunities – *make the ACM portfolio of programs more innovative, flexible, nimble and responsive.*

2.4 Re-evaluate the financial model for ACM programs – *make programs affordable, competitive and sustainable to assure sound academic quality.*

2.5 Recruit aggressively – *update the ways to reach and recruit students for programs.*

3. Publicize ACM members' leadership in liberal arts education by highlighting their accomplishments, especially those achieved through collaboration.

3.1 Document and disseminate to help member colleges lead -- *as scholars know well, getting good data and analysis of results in the hands of key audiences is a reliable recipe for influence.*

3.2 Commemorate 50 years of collaboration to focus on the future – *take advantage of this unique opportunity to celebrate the kind of achievements that we think matter to ACM's internal and external audiences.*

4. Enhance Organizational Effectiveness.

4.1 Establish clear priorities and processes to make choices focused on ACM's mission – *as a consortium, ACM has many constituencies yet cannot be everything to everybody, nor should the*

consortium aim to do everything together all the time; ACM must be ready to drop activities when they become less compelling.

4.2 Create a culture of accountability and assessment – *the good intentions of this plan will be meaningless without a robust program of accountability and assessment within the organization so a culture of assessment sensitive to the values and modes of the liberal arts education community must apply through all programs and activities.*

4.3 Develop sustainable economic practices to support priority activities – *with limited sources of revenue, from programs, members' dues, and external grants ACM must steward its resources to work both to effectively as an organization and to maximize the trust that its partners and collaborators place in the consortium.*

Appendix II

Strategic Planning Task Force on Leveraging Consortial Accomplishments

Ken Anselment, Dean of Admission and Financial Aid, Lawrence University

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Elizabeth Brewer, Director of International Education, Beloit College

Heather Lobban-Viravong, Associate Dean, Grinnell College

Eric Lund, Director of International & Off-Campus Study, St. Olaf College

Robert Moore, V.P. for Finance and Administration, Colorado College

Hannah Schell, Associate Professor of Religious Studies, Monmouth College

Terry Sparkes, Associate Dean and Director of Curriculum Development and Honors, Luther College

Michele Wittler, Associate Dean of Faculty and Registrar, Ripon College

Strategic Planning Task Force on New Initiatives

Jim Cubit, Director of the Library & Information Technology, Lake Forest College

Joe Dieker, V.P. for Academic Affairs & Dean of the College, Cornell College

Barron Koralesky, Associate Dir. of Instructional Technology Services, Macalester College

Roberta Lemke, Director of IT and Libraries, St. Olaf College

James Mulholland, Director of Compensation and Assistant Treasurer, Grinnell College

Arjendu Pattanayak, Associate Dean, Carleton College

Brian Pertl, Dean of the Conservatory of Music, Lawrence University

Marci Sortor, Provost and Dean of the College, St. Olaf College

Diane Tacke, V.P. for Finance and Administration, Luther College

Chad Topaz, Associate Professor of Mathematics, Macalester College

Sarah Withee, (former) Instructional Technologist, Colorado College

Appendix III

Process to Develop a New Strategic Action Plan – 2014-2019

Over several months in 2012 and 2013, two Task Forces discussed the environment in which the colleges operate and areas where joint activity could benefit the colleges in order to develop a new five-year strategic action plan. The two Task Forces were: (1) Task Force on Leveraging Consortial Accomplishments, and (2) Task Force on New Initiatives. Comprising faculty and administrative leaders from all fourteen member colleges ([see Appendix II](#)), these two Task Forces engaged in a planning process to (1) analyze the context in which the ACM colleges collaborate, and (2) identify specific strengths and weaknesses common to the colleges as a consortium, as well as opportunities and threats in the larger environment that this association of colleges faces. Task Force members analyzed the findings of the context review and environmental scan and defined the current situation in a Problem Statement to present the challenges as succinctly as possible.

The analysis, including the rationale for the approach taken in this Strategic Action Plan, is summarized below.

The Task Forces also considered potential goals and strategies from which key elements have been distilled and priorities have been determined to produce this Strategic Action Plan – 2014-2019.

The main messages from the work of the two Task Forces are:

- Liberal arts colleges, their faculty, and administrative staff face new and rapidly changing challenges, but also new opportunities to continue their role as laboratories for research and pedagogical innovation.
- Student bodies are increasingly diverse and students at ACM colleges arrive with new needs, interests, and skills, which pose challenges for not only for teaching, but also for faculty and staff preparation, curriculum, curricular support, financial aid, alumni involvement, and outreach/recruiting.
- Colleges are pressed by persistent cost pressures to make difficult economic choices that often have curricular implications, and making these decisions can strain traditional systems of shared governance.
- New developments in cognitive science are deepening the colleges' understanding of how students learn and are yielding insights that can enhance teaching and course design. The central role of the professoriate is changing, affecting the way faculty interact with students and academic support staff.
- New digital technologies are dramatically changing the possibilities for teaching, research, and collaboration.

Findings from Context Analysis and Environmental Scan (SWOT)

Basic Facts about the Context

In the course of their discussions, members of the two Task Forces identified a number of basic facts about the context in which the ACM colleges collaborate. These included:

1. *Technology*, and the need for technology, is growing at an exponential rate. This is becoming increasingly important for education, affecting the colleges as providers (more smart classrooms, ongoing demand for greater band width) and our students (instant access, constant communication, etc.). *How can liberal arts colleges use new technologies to achieve their missions more effectively?*
2. *Demographics* of students are shifting regionally as population decreases in the Midwest and nationally as new college students come from more diverse socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. *Can liberal arts colleges in the Midwest attract students from these new populations? How might faculty and staff preparation, curriculum, curricular support, financial aid, alumni involvement, and outreach/recruiting need to change?*
3. *Small residential liberal arts colleges comprise an ever smaller portion of the higher education sector as this sector grows.* This situation grows more acute in our current economy as community colleges as well as for-profit and online institutions offer courses at lower relative costs. Higher education has generally sold the importance of higher education partially based on the idea that liberal arts graduates make more money over their careers. Now society increasingly values education based upon a student's first job out of college. *How can liberal arts colleges in the Midwest demonstrate comparative advantage to sustain and possibly expand their share of higher education?*
4. *The central role of the professoriate is changing* as many non-faculty and adjunct instructors are increasingly involved in the teaching and learning enterprise. *What does this mean for the value of the high impact pedagogies of faculty at residential liberal arts colleges? What does this mean for costs?*

Environmental Scan (SWOT Analysis)

In the course of the discussions, members of both Task Forces also identified specific strengths and weaknesses common to the colleges as a consortium, as well as opportunities and threats in the larger environment that this association of colleges faces. The following Strengths-Weaknesses-Opportunities-Threats (SWOT) analysis represents the distillation of the common and main messages from those two separate Task Force reports:

A. Strengths

1. ACM colleges and their faculty are ambitious about what they teach. Some faculty create appropriate ways to use digital resources to enhance their teaching while also using high impact practices in teaching and learning such as off-campus study,

independent research, internship experiences, advising, which all go beyond the classroom.

2. ACM colleges offer residential, advisory, faculty mentoring, and learning support that cannot be secured through most on-line learning resources. Residence can be costly, and is the single biggest variable contributing to retention and graduation. However, residence costs are less expensive in the Midwest than on the coasts.
3. ACM programs and the member colleges increasingly emphasize research, which is especially valuable for liberal arts students. They teach the practical, intellectual, and ethical issues involved in the research process.
4. Liberal arts colleges typically have small class sizes that lend themselves to “flipping the classroom” because the faculty and students are used to using class time for active learning for active learning such as in-class discussion, problem-solving, and group work.
5. Some faculty at ACM member colleges can teach specialized subjects that are not available at other ACM campuses. At the aggregate level, therefore, there is some unused capacity.
6. The development of collaborative academic, managerial, and financial mechanisms by the ACM over the past five decades to operate a joint portfolio of off-campus study programs for students and, more recently, a portfolio of faculty development programs has produced an accumulation of social and institutional capital for collaboration - including trust – among the ACM colleges that benefits each campus. While other colleges and universities are beginning to join forces with ad hoc collaborations, ACM colleges have a well-established track record of collaboration.
7. Some residential colleges are able to use off-campus programs to enroll more students overall by filling empty beds left by the students who are off campus.

B. Weaknesses

1. The colleges lack good evidence on the comparative benefits of liberal arts education. Generating data on the value of this type of education is challenging because assessment typically focuses on the short term while colleges aim to educate students for life. The value of residential living and its support for learning in the classroom is not clearly articulated in college marketing, and cross-institutional data to substantiate the link is lacking.
2. The colleges generally do not focus sufficiently on helping students think through how they can use their liberal arts education.

3. Many ACM institutions are highly tuition dependent in a very competitive environment. The size of small residential liberal arts colleges is not likely to grow significantly in the medium term. Therefore, with limited growth in net tuition revenue, many colleges face a tension between generating a vision and programs that attract students and inspire donors, on the one hand, and financial realities that limit what is possible for an institution to take on, on the other.
4. High impact practices are costly, as is incorporating new technologies, while net tuition limits revenues, so all colleges face constraints on the resources to do new things like diversifying the curriculum. Colleges are typically better at adding courses and programs, especially when resources are available, than at ending activities despite reductions in resources.
5. Colleges have not taken advantage of off-campus programs. Inclusion of students from traditionally underserved backgrounds, as well as students of color generally, has been difficult for a myriad of reasons, and inability to pay the cost is a contributing factor. Many students who study abroad often have difficulty articulating what their learning gains were when they return. Faculty members often lack sufficient knowledge about off-campus programs to effectively use and integrate the experiences and learning that students gain off campus.
6. Many faculty members are not current with skills that are needed to use rapidly changing technologies. Therefore, they are unable to teach students who use technologies extensively but without critical thinking with respect to either the impact of these technologies or their potential as learning tools.
7. Technological expertise is spread thinly, therefore it is difficult to support faculty and student needs.
8. There are limits to curricular offerings on small campuses. Some key courses are too full because of faculty constraints, and other courses especially in specialized topics, are under-enrolled or cannot be offered for lack of enrollment even though faculty could teach the topic.

C. Opportunities

1. Liberal arts colleges can build on the interest of private sector CEOs, who surveys say want to hire liberal arts graduates, by reaching out more effectively to the hiring departments in firms. Colleges can coach graduates on how to articulate the practical value of their degree in job interviews, and to their parents and other constituencies, to take fuller advantage of the edge their degrees gives them.

2. There is a growing demand – which liberal arts colleges can fill – to educate students in information literacy, in understanding the impacts of different kinds of technology use, and in acquiring the skills to use technology wisely. Since it is not possible to keep up with the sheer expansion of information liberal arts education must teach students how to use information strategically by learning metacognitive skills or “how to learn”.
3. There are rapidly expanding digital resources and technological tools to enhance teaching and learning.
4. Technology can help in teaching, research, internships, workshops, and collaborations. Technology can help reduce duplication, help integrate a student’s off-campus experience with other knowledge and with on-campus experiences, and can expand students’ tools to observe and reflect.
5. There are new enrollment opportunities, both regionally and globally, in making a cost-competitive case for the value of liberal arts education since tuition costs at state universities now approach the level of discounted tuition at ACM colleges.

D. Threats

1. ACM colleges operate in a very competitive environment that is also undergoing technological disruption. Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) and for-profit higher education raise the question whether students and their families will continue to pay private college tuition if a student can do so much for free, as MOOCs offer introductory level material, giving immediate feedback to students.
2. Middle-class incomes have eroded, raising questions about how middle-class families will pay for higher education at liberal arts colleges.
3. Rapidly changing technologies mean that faculty, as well as IT staff, need more specialized knowledge, greater and more flexible skills, and up-to-date training to use technology effectively.
4. Technology can be a barrier to immersion on off-campus study.
5. Shifting demographics in the socio-economic and cultural backgrounds of students is resulting in a gap between what students need and what faculty think they need in a college experience.
6. Compliance with federal requirements is an increasing challenge, especially for small institutions, as rules and regulations on higher education institutions expand and government funding has decreased.
7. Costs continue to rise steadily as colleges continually seek to augment quality.

Problem Statement

Task Force members analyzed the findings of the context review and environmental scan and defined the current situation in a Problem Statement that presents the challenges as succinctly as possible.

Several questions emerged in those discussions that were seen as essential to the challenge to stay relevant and parlay institutional and collective strengths:

1. How can ACM as an organization help its member colleges demonstrate the value of a liberal arts education more clearly visible to multiple audiences (students, prospective students, parents, and potential employers)?
2. How can the ACM institutions draw on their strengths to help each other innovate?
3. How can the colleges use their consortial resources to help member institutions achieve economies of scale, minimize risks and disruptions, and be more cost effective?
4. How can the colleges use technology to improve on-campus and off-campus learning while remaining competitive and relevant?

These efforts produced the following Problem Statement:

Problem Statement. The ACM colleges want to remain attractive to students and responsive to their needs. The ACM colleges have robust records of ambitious liberal arts education, dynamic and creative faculties and staff, and a well-established history of collaboration. However, changing demographics, the faltering economy, and the changing educational landscape threaten the competitive advantages of liberal arts colleges. The ACM colleges must now overcome powerful challenges, including technological disruption, and take advantage of new opportunities. Through the ACM the colleges can collaborate in finding new, innovative, and financially sustainable ways to foster beneficial change and to parlay their collective strengths to maintain and increase the value of the distinctive education each member college offers.

Rationale for the Approach Taken in This Strategic Action Plan

The ACM colleges' strengths include ambitious faculty, exceptional educational value, robust off-campus study and student research, long-term potential for students, and accumulated joint experience. These strengths position the ACM colleges to take advantage of current opportunities:

- Gains from articulating skills to potential employers.
- Integration of off-campus study with on campus curricula.
- Rapidly expanding technology resources and a parallel demand to learn about them.
- New potential sources of students.

Deploying their strengths to take advantage of these opportunities would allow the ACM colleges to address both their:

- Internal weaknesses – lack of good data and articulation of employment value of liberal arts degrees, lack of faculty knowledge about needs of new kinds of students and about off-campus programs, low participation in off-campus study by students from underserved populations, frequent dependence on tuition and discounting, the financial constraints of net tuition, the curricular limits of small campuses, the need for more increased expertise in instructional technology among faculty and staff, and
- External threats – the highly competitive economic environment of the colleges, the relative affordability of residential liberal arts colleges, technology as a distraction from off-campus immersion, engagement and learning, compliance requirements of new regulations, the nature and pace of change between faculty and student generations, and the expansion of information.

ACM colleges have a distinctive perspective and track record for leveraging their consortial accomplishments and for taking new initiatives to address these issues collectively with largely internal resources together with strategic external support.