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A Document Analysis On The Role Of Innovation In The Strategic Plans Of Small Private Liberal Arts Institutions

Jillain Kaye Veil-Ehnert

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A DOCUMENT ANALYSIS ON THE ROLE OF INNOVATION IN THE STRATEGIC
PLANS OF SMALL PRIVATE LIBERAL ARTS INSTITUTIONS

by

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A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty

of the

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for the degree of

Doctor of Education

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August 2, 2024

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study provides interpretations of the nature of strategic plans at small private liberal arts institutions. The study explored the concepts of innovation, entrepreneurship, and transformation detailed in the plans. This study included a specific cohort of eight United States small private liberal arts colleges with similar characteristics regarding academic programs, enrollment, and fiscal stability. The research was conducted through document analysis of the institutions' publicly available strategic plans. The data collected illustrates what the documents indicate about innovation, entrepreneurship, and transformation at small private liberal arts colleges. Key findings on innovations in the plans included a focus on applied learning opportunities for students, career focused curriculum, and transparency of challenges. The research findings were presented to interested audiences through a white paper.

Keywords: Higher education, small private colleges, liberal arts colleges, financial challenges, innovation, entrepreneurship, transformation, strategic plans

INTRODUCTION

Higher education in the United States is a \$993 billion industry (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023) that serves greater society through the education of individuals, advancement of knowledge, production of research, discoveries of the natural world, and operations of healthcare facilities. In some cases, an institution of higher education (IHE) is an economic factor in its community or a cultural focal point (Carlson, 2024; Hatch et al., 2022; Jesse, 2023; Toppo, 2019). Through the many generations of higher education, the industry has met challenges from governing bodies, demographic changes and workforce demands. Studying the changing aspects of higher education is the work of countless scholars and industry experts.

The purpose of this research study is to explore a cohort of liberal arts colleges to determine what their published strategic plans indicated about innovation, entrepreneurship, and transformation. These concepts were selected as they are connected to change in higher education (Hall & Lulic, 2021). The dissertation is divided into three components. Artifact I outlines the problem of practice through a review of literature, approaches to solving the problem, and theoretical approach to the research. Artifact II includes the research approach and implementation, analytical strategy, and findings as interpreted through the lens of institutional theory (Scott, 2005, 2008). Finally, Artifact III offers an implementation of a solution through a white paper detailing how a cohort of small private liberal arts IHEs prioritize innovation in their published strategic plans. The white paper was designed to inform leaders of small private liberal arts institutions as they pursue innovation in their academic communities to thrive during a volatile time in higher education in the United States.

ARTIFACT I: PROBLEM OF PRACTICE

Overview of the Problem

The viability of small, private liberal arts institutions in the United States is in jeopardy once again as they attempt to survive the 2019-2021 global pandemic and the resulting economic challenges, as well as the general public's distrust in higher education (Fishman et al., 2022; Grawe, 2022). A recent crisis for higher education, the 2007-2009 economic recession, forced private liberal arts colleges to modify themselves to survive (Hilbun & Mamiseishvili, 2015). A sense of community and the opportunity to interact with faculty and peers are among the hallmarks of a small college. However, these strengths became a liability as institutions were forced to reduce community gatherings and offer remote courses to ensure safety.

The struggle for survival is not new to small colleges that have been facing dwindling enrollment and increased costs for years (Eide, 2018; Grawe, 2021; Hatch et al., 2022; Hoover, 2017; Marcus, 2018); however, the pandemic brought many colleges to a near-breaking point or forced their closure. As opposed to the 2007 recession, the 2019-2021 COVID pandemic was more than a financial challenge, it disrupted the mode of delivery of courses, caused unexpected expenditures such as person protection equipment, suspended all operations, and forced IHE to reconstruct their campuses to maintain a healthy campus for students and faculty. Now in 2024, the 2024 Free Application for Federal Financial Aid's (FAFSA) drastic revisions, delayed roll-out, and system issues added to the challenges for tuition-dependent colleges in the post-pandemic economy (Knox, 2024).

Enrollment in the liberal arts is declining at the same time employers are seeking the critical thinking and communication skills that students develop through the humanities and arts (Finley et al., 2021; Finley, 2021). By design, small undergraduate colleges are well-positioned

to provide some of the traits of successful institutions including creating a caring, supportive environment and connecting students to their communities (Wolf-Wendel, 2000). Small class sizes, access to research and scholarship, and an emphasis on teaching and learning versus research are hallmarks of a small liberal arts college. These strengths align well with research on student success (Wolf-Wendel, 2000); however, these strengths are expensive. The cost model of small colleges with high personnel expenses is contributing to the financial crisis leading to institutional closures.

The history of higher education enrollment in the United States illustrates the challenges faced by the industry, with the peak of undergraduate enrollment of over 18 million in 2010 and a pre-pandemic decline to 16.6 million eight years later (Butryowicz & D'Amato, 2020, par. 16). Between 2010-2018, close to 600 institutions (two-year and four-year) had enrollment declines of 25% (Butryowicz & D'Amato, 2020). The preeminence of the liberal arts began its decline with the rise of land-grant institutions and a focus on the skills needed for work (Geiger, 2016). For this reason, some contemporary faculty express disdain for pre-professional or professional programs as they believe the humanities and educating the whole person provides the best education versus curriculum focused on future employment (Hirt, 2006; Schneider, 2018). The slow process of decline is illustrated by the percentage of humanities degrees awarded, 20% of all US degrees offered in 1967 and only 5% in 2018 (Marcus, 2018). In response to the growing challenges in higher education, experts counsel small colleges to utilize innovation (Eide, 2018; Marcus, 2018; Mintz, 2021; Pulsipher & Stowers, 2021; Wingard, 2022; Zhao & Watterston, 2021), employ an entrepreneurial approach (Shiferaw et al., 2023), or undertake transformational actions (Macy, 2017).

Strategic planning in higher education is an important process for both internal and external stakeholders. Strategic plans in higher education are public articulations of the shared goals of those in the community, including executive leadership, faculty, staff, and students (Sutphen et al., 2018). In addition, higher education strategic plans are the connection between mission that reflect “This is what we are here to do” (Hinton, 2012, p.10) and the vision for what the institution “intends to become within a certain timeframe” (Hinton, 2012, p. 10). Strategic plans are also key documents to disseminate the priorities of an organization, and insights can be gained as to the institution’s mission, vision, and values through study of the plans.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative document analysis research was to review strategic plans from a cohort of small private liberal arts institutions to interpret what they illustrate about innovation, entrepreneurship, and transformation; three concepts related to change. The cohort included small colleges that exhibit fiscal stability as determined through five years of data on their federal financial composite scores. In addition, their enrollment data was considered including the five-year average for total enrollment from the fall of 2017 to the fall of 2021. This review of small private colleges provided insights to inform decision-making at similar institutions as they develop and implement strategies to enact change and thrive through economic difficulties.

The subjects of this research are liberal arts colleges that have both traditional liberal arts programs and pre-professional programs, classified as “balanced” by the Carnegie classification system (American Council on Higher Education, 2022). This type of institution has likely added pre-professional or professional programs in response to external and internal challenges and opportunities (Baker & Baldwin, 2014). The qualitative study provided interpretations of the

nature of strategic plans at small colleges, with student populations between 1,000 – 2,500, and illustrate any innovation, entrepreneurship, and transformation detailed in the plans.

Research Question

The following research question was utilized to focus the study of strategic plans and innovation.

PRQ: What do small private liberal arts institutions' strategic plans if any, indicate about innovation, entrepreneurship, and transformation through document analysis and frequency of the terms and the contexts in which they are used?

Significance of the Study

This research study utilized a qualitative approach to analyze plans from small, private, liberal arts institutions to determine how they emphasize innovation, entrepreneurship, and transformation to enhance their programming and operations as they to ensure their survival and continuation of service to students. The closure of small private liberal arts institutions causes the loss of economic benefit and service to their communities and a lack of choices for learning environments for students (Carlson, 2024; Eide, 2018). The communities and higher education stand to lose educational institutions where the teaching of undergraduate students is the primary focus, and a strong sense of community and support that enables students to thrive. There are many challenges for small private liberal arts colleges as well as factors that contribute to their success. This research study provided insights into what small colleges are focused on while they plan for the future and provided guidance for similar institutions seeking innovation.

Key Concepts

The concepts of innovation, entrepreneurship, and transformation are central to the work of the study and the following section defines the concepts as utilized by the researcher in the study.

Innovation, Entrepreneurship, and Transformation

In the context of liberal arts colleges, it is important to define *innovation* in broad terms versus a narrow version dependent upon economic development, technology, or patentable inventions (Gulbrandsen & Aanstad, 2015). Innovation was conceptualized as a thing or action that is new or novel resulting in something that is perceived to have value (Linton, 2018, p.7). This study used the understanding of innovation in higher education as, “the conception and application of new or novel ideas in evolving learning environments” (Barger et al., 2021, p. 97).

Entrepreneurship in the study applied to individuals and institutions, therefore both definitions are included here. For individuals, entrepreneurship must also be widely defined as more than an activity of the business school on campus. For this research, *entrepreneurship* was defined as, “the self-directed pursuit of opportunities to create value for others” (Schoeniger et al., 2021, p. 4). The value can be but is not limited to financial with a broad definition of value including societal benefits, collaboration, improved strategies in an organization; any value defined by the one benefiting from the activity (Schoeniger et al., 2021, p. 4). In addition, *entrepreneurial* higher education institutions were understood as ones that, “actively seeks to shift in organizational character so as to arrive at a more promising posture for the future” (Foss & Gibson, 2015, p. 2).

Transformation in relation to higher education was defined using Kezar & Eckel (2002, p. 295) explanation that, “it alters the culture of the institution by changing select underlying assumptions and institutional behaviors, processes, and products” and impacts the entire organization.

Overview of the Literature

The following literature review provides information and research related to small private liberal arts colleges, challenges, innovation, and higher education strategic plans.

Discussion includes small private liberal arts institutions, challenges faced by the institutions, innovation, and the study of strategic plans.

Small Private Liberal Arts Colleges

The history of higher education in the United States begins with liberal arts institutions often with a religious affiliation (Geiger, 2016; Hirt, 2006). As higher education evolved, so did institutions established with a denominational focus with missions to serve the people of their faith in the broad curriculum of the liberal arts that was focused on holistic education of students typically on residential campuses (Geiger, 2016; Hirt, 2006). Historically, the liberal arts included “logic, grammar, rhetoric, mathematics, geometry, and music” (Glyner & Weeks, 1998). Contemporary liberal arts institutions continued a focus on a comprehensive curriculum that requires diverse coursework in addition to a primary discipline of study and empowers students to develop critical thinking and communication skills (Hirt, 2006; Roche, 2010). In addition to curricular study, Roche (2010) explains, “the liberal arts ideal entails the goal of educating the whole person, which presupposes a meaningful community of learning and a rich residential life experience” (p. 6).

The continual closure of small colleges across the United States impacts access to higher education and an educational environment where many students thrive. The small colleges of primary concern for this research were the mid-level colleges, many initially established by a religious sect with low prestige. The prestigious, well-known institutions with extensive endowments continue to grow in enrollment and wealth while the second class of private

colleges face enrollment and financial challenges (Swidler, 2020). Experts compare this growing divide to the difference between the extremely wealth in the United States and the shrinking middle class (Swidler, 2020). The middle class of small private colleges often compete with public institutions that are supported by their state (Eide, 2018).

Colleges in the middle are typically not as selective related to enrollment, small in size, and although they are higher in cost, they offer significant scholarships and discounts for students (Eide, 2018; Tarrant et al., 2017). Financial aid is one of the challenges for institutions as discount rates have risen and provide less net revenue for the institution at the same time that costs are increasing (Chabotar, 2010; Eide, 2018). From inception, these institutions were required to seek outside funds to meet expenses not covered by student tuition and church affiliations (Ferrall, 2011). The reliance on donor support created opportunities for wealthy philanthropists to invest in operating and endowment support (Ferrall, 2011).

Evolution is a continual process for small institutions as they seek to provide relevant and engaging curriculum as they respond to external forces beyond the economy including changing technology, and student and parent demands for career-ready graduates prepared for work in highly specialized fields (Baker & Baldwin, 2014). Traditional undergraduate liberal arts institutions focus on the arts and sciences with very few professional programs (American Council on Education, 2022). Many of these institutions have pivoted to meet these demands by adding professional programs, graduate study, and online offerings (Baker & Baldwin, 2014). This research focused on baccalaureate institutions in the balanced category, indicating they equally graduate students with liberal arts degrees in the Arts and Sciences and those with professional degrees (American Council on Education, 2022). Institutions of higher education in this category have either been established with a broader than typical liberal arts focus, or they

have already exhibited innovation through their addition of professional programs to their curriculum.

Challenges at Small Private Liberal Arts Colleges

Challenges faced by small colleges include financial uncertainty, demographics, and public perceptions of higher education. Although the challenges are applicable for all of higher education, small private colleges face these headwinds from a position of vulnerability as they are typically tuition dependent (Bauer-Wolf, 2023a, 2023b; Carlson, 2024; Chabotar, 2010; Hilbun & Mamiseishvili, 2015; Rosowsky, 2024; Unglesbee, 2024a).

Financial

Financial struggles are a part of the history of many private liberal arts colleges with dire warnings as early as 1971 that many were facing financial instability (Ferrall, 2011). IHEs that survived the 2008 recession were tested once again during the COVID-19 pandemic. The post-pandemic economic challenges including rising inflation exacerbated the financial difficulties for some institutions (Carlson, 2024). For decades, the most daunting challenge faced by all higher education leaders is rising costs and the current American economic challenges have exasperated those difficulties (Aleog, 2007; Toppo, 2019).

Demographics

For years prior to the pandemic of 2020, economists anticipated an enrollment cliff due to the 2008 financial bust and lower birth rates (Hatch et al., 2022; Hoover, 2017). Post-pandemic reports indicate over one million fewer higher education students are enrolled than anticipated, further exacerbating enrollment deficits (Fischer, 2022). Higher education leaders follow demographics and enrollment ebbs and flows. Small liberal arts colleges are particularly susceptible to these fluctuations, due in part to their comparatively small enrollment. For

example, a 100-student loss at a university with 20,000 students does not have the same impact as at an institution with 2,000 students.

Public Perceptions of Higher Education

The continued concerns regarding the need for and usefulness of a degree from an IHE and the general public's distrust in higher education (Fishman et al., 2022; Grawe, 2022). In addition, there is a trend that employers, including the federal and some state governments eliminated requirements for bachelor's degree for employment (Bur, 2020; Connley, 2018; Crist, 2023; Lederman, 2022; Smalley, 2023; Smetanka, 2024). The general distrust in higher education and decreasing societal value of a four-year degree will impact enrollment of all IHEs including those in the research study.

Innovation

The call for innovation in the sector of higher education gained additional fervor in response to the volatile environmental and internal difficulties faced by IHEs. As long-standing organizations, IHEs have transformed themselves to meet the ever-changing needs of the public (Gorzelany et. al., 2021). According to experts, most colleges and universities will need to radically change, reimagine, innovate, and take bold risks to survive (Chopp et al., 2016; Darden, 2021; Kim, 2017). Key to the creation of a culture of innovation is flexibility which in turn will encourage entrepreneurship to benefit and contribute to the economic and societal gains (Gorzelany et. al., 2021).

Sweet Briar College, slated for closure in 2015, has transformed into an innovator, being named as one of the nation's Most Innovative Schools by the 2021 rankings published by *U.S. News & World Report* (Poleski, 2020). The example of schools such as Sweet Briar are heralded as proof that colleges must change to survive. In the case of Sweet Briar, stakeholders (the

alumnae, faculty, and city) filed lawsuits to prevent its closure and change its leadership (An et al., 2017). The case reached the Virginia Supreme Court and resulted in a settlement that included commitments by the alumnae to financially support the institution and the College to hire a new president and replace the majority of its board of trustees (Jaschik, 2015). Two attributes that factored into Sweet Briar's turnaround are its rural location and financial situation. As a rural Virginia IHE, the College struggled with enrollment and cited its location as one factor (Seltzer, 2016). Sweet Briar revitalized its curriculum to highlight agriculture and sustainability, strengths of its geographical location (Ostroth, 2022). The financial challenges faced by Sweet Briar were balanced by its \$80 million endowment, which enabled the alumnae to argue for continuation of the IHE as well as provide resources to maintain the institutional operations while curricular and organizational changes were incorporated to ensure its the long-term viability (Jaschik, 2015).

Higher Education Strategic Plans

This research study on strategic plans uses Hinton's (2012) understanding of strategic plans as the bridge between the current state of the institution represented by its mission statement, and the envisioned state represented in its vision statement. Extensive research on the strategic plans of institutions illustrates the priorities, values, and planning process (Aleog, 2007; Brint, 2005; Hall & Lulic, 2021; Taylor & Karr, 1999). In comparison to the history of higher education, strategic plans are a relatively recent artifact with one of the earliest strategic plans articulated in 1960 at the University of California in 1960 (Sutphen et al., 2018). However, a focus on higher education strategic planning began in earnest in the 1980's and gained nationwide adoption by the end of the 1990's (Aleog, 2007). National research on strategic planning in higher education conducted in 1987 illustrates faculty typically had limited

understanding of external forces that provided negative impact on higher education and were skeptical of the need for strategic plans (Taylor & Karr, 1999). The resulting plans resembled lists of desired outcomes without concrete details on how they could be achieved (Taylor & Karr, 1999). Less than ten years later, research indicates 1996 plans reflected the financial realities of the time period and explicitly stated the growing difficulties facing higher education as well as detailed plans for meeting the challenges (Taylor & Karr, 1999). Correspondingly, more institutional populations, including faculty, recognized the need for and value of strategic planning (Taylor & Karr, 1999).

Strategic plans serve many purposes including marketing the institution to prospective families, ensuring alumni stakeholders their institution continues to achieve, seeking funding from external resources, and are an important artifact in the accreditation process. Contemporary strategic plans are utilized by accrediting bodies to evaluate an institution's effectiveness and success in fulfilling its mission (Hinton, 2012). They serve as policy documents and valuable resources for internal and external stakeholders (Sutphen et al., 2018). The primary purpose of a strategic plan may depend upon the IHE crafting it whether it is an inspirational guide for current and future stakeholders, a rallying cry to overcome financial challenges, or a plan for increasing rankings and reputation (Sutphen et al., 2018). Strategic plans are valuable resources for those attempting to understand the priorities held by an institution as they are public documents that express the expectations for what students should learn, faculty should teach, and the outcomes to be produced. They provide community members with guidance as to how they are to contribute to institutional goals and priorities (Sutphen et al., 2018).

As research artifacts, strategic plans serve as policy documents that formalize the IHEs' aspirations (Sutphen et al., 2018), developmental goals, and illustrate their future directions

(Stoian et al., 2021). Researchers have utilized content analysis to examine interdisciplinary components of strategic plans and potential connections with additional artifacts detailing campus priorities (Barringer et al., 2020; Harris, 2010). Hall and Lulich's (2020) mixed methods content analysis of strategic plans from 46 universities examined them to determine what they illustrate about innovation.

Common Approaches to Address the Problem

The challenges small private liberal arts institutions are battling do not have simple solutions or quick remedies to complex issues and concerns (Kelchen, 2024). However, leaders of small liberal arts colleges have deployed a variety of strategies to remain viable and financially stable during challenging times including focusing on innovation, reducing operating expenses, and the addition of academic programs (Biemiller, 2019).

Innovation

Innovation has taken many forms as institutions develop strategies tailored to their situations. Globally, higher education institutions have worked to create an entrepreneurial culture by creating curriculum, staff development, and establishing learning teams (Rae et al., 2009). Small institutions have relied upon the recruitment and hiring of presidents with innovative plans to serve as change-makers in their institutions (Carey, 2014). Distinctive programs have been developed by small institutions determining their niche expertise and expanding upon it (Biemiller, 2018, 2019; Marcy, 2017).

Reducing Expenses

In opposition to increasing academic programs are the more publicized reduction efforts for IHE which often targets low enrollment programs of study. The Arts and Humanities in particular are often a target for cuts including eliminating performing arts, foreign languages, and

music (Moody, 2024). In response to financial concerns, IHEs are cutting personnel or putting a hiring freeze in place, reducing programs, and cutting competitive athletics (Biemiller, 2019; Chabotar, 2010; Hatch et al., 2022; Kelchen, 2024; Toppo, 2019; Unglesbee, 2024a, 2024b). One of the challenges for IHEs are the costs related to facilities that meet safety and athletic conference standards for competition (Cote, 2024).

Academic Programs of Study

The addition or reduction of academic programs has been implemented at small private IHEs in an effort to establish stability. The primary mission of each IHE is to educate students, and the curriculum and pedagogy used are crucial to their efforts. Research produced for and promoted to this sector of higher education has illustrated the benefits of curriculum that provides applied learning in which student translate classroom knowledge to real world endeavors. Kuh's (2008) research on high impact practices related to experiential learning examined the outcomes related to experiences that encourage students to develop the skills to assist them in future careers and life endeavors. Experiential learning, applied learning, and high-impact practices have been implemented in courses, co-curricular opportunities, and fully embedded in curriculum. For example, numerous institutions have required capstone, internship, research, study abroad, or other learning experiences for graduation.

According to experts, one strategy undertaken by small private liberal arts colleges is to create new academic programs (Chopp et al., 2016; Kelchen, 2024; Toppo, 2019) including signature programs (Biemiller, 2018; Marcy, 2017). The development of a signature program has been successful to date by small colleges, but critics warn it is a slow process (Biemiller, 2018). Experts have encouraged the institutions to design programs with future employability in mind (Cardenas, 2021; Kovačević et al., 2023; Lorenzo, 2023). Another strategy is to clearly articulate

the value of current programming as illustrated by a college that provided career paths for each of its liberal arts majors (Marcus, 2018). Institutions have become creative by offering a guaranteed job for graduates or a free additional semester of study if they cannot find employment (Marcus, 2018). Many humanities programs have become interdisciplinary – such as medical humanities or environmental humanities – to attract students from more populated STEM fields. Funders concerned with the humanities (e.g., Mellon Foundation, National Endowment for the Humanities) are funding interdisciplinary curriculum and encouraging innovation.

In addition to adding undergraduate programs, some small private liberal arts colleges began adding graduate programs, while still maintaining their primarily undergraduate classification (Adame, 2023; Hatch et al., 2022; Kelchen, 2024; Marcus, 2019; Marcy, 2023). Kelchen (2024) indicates the addition of graduate programs in addition to undergraduate is one of the first initiatives struggling small colleges undertake to increase revenue from tuition. June (2022) reports on research in adding master’s programs, “About 160 colleges—nearly all institutions with fewer than 5,000 students—didn’t have a single master’s program in 2011-12 but had at least one by 2019-20.”

Theoretical Framework

The conceptual framework through which the strategic plans were analyzed is institutional theory, which has its origins in in the social sciences (Scott, 2008). Throughout its almost fifty-year history, institutional theory has continued to evolve as theorists have sought to analyze organizations through their research and intellectual endeavors (Scott, 2008). Scott (2010, p. 6) defines organizations, “Institutions are social structures that have attained a high degree of resilience [and are] composed of cultural-cognitive, normative, and regulative elements

that, together with associated activities and resources, provide stability and meaning to social life.” Cultural-cognitive or mimetic refers to meaning constructed through, “shared conceptions that constitute the nature of social reality and the frames through which meaning is made” (Scott, 2008, p. 428). Scott further explains normative components as including, “a prescriptive, evaluative, and obligatory dimension into social life” (2008, p. 428) accreditation with its extensive policies and peer reviews is an example of this component. Regulative elements are described by Scott (2008, p. 428) as stressing, “rule-setting, monitoring, and sanctioning activities” (Scott, 2008, p. 428). An example of this coercive isomorphism are the rules and laws in place for IHEs that participate in federal and state financial aid plans force IHEs to have similar policies.

From a perspective of institutional theory, social change is understood with the following features:

- detailed attention to existing institutional variety at the organization, sector, field, or societal level;
- a focus on the interdependence of and interactions between organized units at multiple levels;
- awareness of the effects of non-local, as well as local factors;
- appreciation of the temporal nature of social life, the ongoing effects of the past on the present and future
- emphasis on the importance of ideas (symbolic systems) that mediate between environmental conditions and actions;

- an awareness that processes may produce convergence of procedures and forms but also promote diversity and the emergence of new types of social behavior and novel systems (Scott, 2010, pp. 17-18).

The analysis of strategic plans was understood through these components of change to better understand the nature of change and revitalization in institutions. Scott (2010) articulates the importance of the key features above to create social change in organizations; the degree to which the strategic plans included these features indicates whether or not the plans should be transformative. In particular, the component of institutional theory (Scott, 2010) related to the symbolic systems and value placed on concepts and ideas as the conduit between the current environment and actions are of interest to this research as the published and promoted strategic plans studied exemplify the IHEs' ideal visions of themselves. The strategic plans illustrate the IHE's level of awareness of its processes and confidence that they will produce the desired outcomes upon implementation.

CONCLUSION OF ARTIFACT I

Small private liberal arts colleges provide opportunities for students to grow and develop in a community built to create connections by its small nature and opportunities for collaborations between faculty and students. However, small colleges face numerous challenges that have caused some to close and others to implement activities to regain stability including increasing or decreasing academic programs, decreasing expenses, and implementing innovative initiatives or practices. This research study provided insights into what small colleges are focused on while they plan for the future and provided guidance for similar institutions seeking innovation. The research study explored a cohort of small private liberal arts institutions to determine what their published strategic plans indicated about innovation. The concept of

innovation was identified for this study due to the history of experts and critics calling for innovation in higher education. The findings from the study are understood through the lens of institutional theory.

ARTIFACT II: RESEARCH APPROACH

The purpose of this qualitative document analysis research was to review strategic plans from a cohort of small private liberal arts institutions to interpret what they illustrate about innovation, entrepreneurship, and transformation; three concepts related to change. This research study on strategic plans was inspired by published research on strategic plans of universities that utilized content analysis and quantitative methods to illustrate what institutions indicate about innovation (Hall & Lulich, 2021). In the Hall and Lulich (2021) study, a team of researchers analyzed strategic plans of 52 highly ranked United States universities. Hall and Lulich (2021) evaluated publicly available strategic plans for word frequencies associated with innovation or tradition. The researcher utilized document analysis to study strategic plans from small colleges to determine what they indicated about innovation. This review of small private liberal arts colleges provided insights that may help inform decision making at similar institutions as they develop and implement strategies to thrive through economic difficulties.

Historically, researchers have used higher education strategic plans for study of the priorities, values, or planning processes of the institution (Aleog, 2007; Brint, 2005; Hall & Lulich, 2021; Taylor & Karr, 1999). As research artifacts, strategic plans serve as policy documents that formalize the IHEs' aspirations (Sutphen et al., 2018), developmental goals, and illustrate their future directions (Stoian et al., 2021). Publicly available strategic plans also illustrate what the IHE wants the general public to understand about the institution. The public aspect of the plans is of interest to this research as it indicates what institutions and leadership want the reader to understand about their colleges and universities.

The subjects of this research are liberal arts colleges that have both traditional liberal arts programs and pre-professional programs, classified as "balanced" by the Carnegie classification

system (American Council on Higher Education, 2022). This type of institution has likely added pre-professional or professional programs in response to external and internal challenges and opportunities (Baker & Baldwin, 2014). The qualitative study provided interpretations of the nature of strategic plans at small colleges, with student populations between 1,000 – 2,500, and illustrate innovation, entrepreneurship, and transformation detailed in the plans. The cohort included small colleges that exhibit fiscal stability as determined through five years of data on their federal financial composite scores. In addition, their enrollment data was considered including the five-year average for total enrollment from the fall of 2017 to the fall of 2021. This review of small private colleges provided insights to inform decision-making at similar institutions as they develop and implement strategies to enact change and thrive through economic difficulties.

Research Question

The following research question was utilized to focus the study of strategic plans and innovation, entrepreneurship, and transformation.

PRQ: What do small private liberal arts institutions' strategic plans if any, indicate about innovation, entrepreneurship, and transformation through document analysis and frequency of the terms and the contexts in which they are used?

Research Design

Once a research approach has been determined, the next step is to create the research design which is the detailed process used to collect, analyze, and report on data (Creswell & Guetterman, 2018). Qualitative research is deployed by researchers seeking to understand a problem, topic, process, or concept by using an open-ended research question (Creswell & Guetterman, 2018). The research study explored a complex and multifaceted problem of practice

related to challenges faced by small colleges. There are many factors that contribute to the challenges nationally as well as on a local and campus level. Qualitative research enables a researcher to uncover themes in data and to interpret them to discern meaning (Creswell & Guetterman, 2018). The researcher selected a qualitative research approach to the study as it provides strategies for in-depth consideration of a small sample of strategic plans through text analysis.

Research Method

Research methods are the procedures the researcher used to collect and interpret data (McMillian & Schumacher, 2014). In order to conduct useful and applicable data, research methods need to include clearly defined and followed procedures (McMillian & Schumacher, 2014). Prior (2003) indicates the use of document analysis is informative for research conducted on items in their original form. Bowen (2009) indicates one of the limitations of document research in relation to organizations is the potential for artifacts to be heavily influenced by organizational leadership or policies and may be inauthentic. However, in the case of this research study, there is a presumption that the official strategic plans are biased and represent how the leaders of the IHE represent the institution to external audiences. Therefore, the limitation of the method of document analysis lends itself to the research study. This research study included strategic plans of IHEs in the cohort. Additional information on the IHE website was used to provide background information on the IHE. According to Bowen (2009), the procedure to follow for analysis includes “finding, selecting, appraising, and synthesizing data contained in documents” (p. 28). The first three steps, finding, selecting, and appraising are included in the method section and the fourth step, synthesizing data is included in the research finding section.

Sampling

The researcher determined a sampling strategy to begin the first step of document analysis, finding the artifacts. Sampling in qualitative research allows the researcher to select a cohort that represents the organization, people, or cases being studied. For qualitative research, sampling processes are connected to the purpose and focus of the study, strategies for data collection, and accessibility of the information (McMillian & Schumacher, 2014). Purposeful sampling is a process of selecting the sites or people to be considered by determining how well they will help the researcher understand the phenomenon of the study and how much information they will yield (Creswell & Guetterman, 2018). Extreme case sampling is utilized to study outliers to the status quo whether through success or failure (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Gutterman, 2018). Extreme case sampling was used to identify and study institutions that exhibited fiscal stability, experienced an enrollment increase at a time when enrollments were low across higher education, and maintained consistent enrollment between 2017-2021.

The researcher began the design of the research using a definition from the Carnegie Classification System (American Council on Higher Education, 2022) that included the two categories, balanced arts and sciences with no or some graduate coexistence. However, in the IPEDS system, the options did not allow for that selection as the classifications had been updated. After reviewing the definitions for the available options, the researcher chose the *Carnegie Classification of Baccalaureate Colleges: Arts & Sciences* category. However, this did not reflect *graduate coexistence* reflected in one of the original categories used in the planning stage. The researcher determined there was value to including graduate programs because it is a strategy deployed by institutions that illustrates innovation and enhances recruitment (Adame,

2023; Hatch et al., 2022). The researcher included the variable that the highest degree offered would be the master's degree.

The choice to use college enrollment data from 2020 to 2021 was made relative to the most recent data accessible via IPEDS when the researcher was selecting a cohort for the study. The difficulty related to the 2020 and 2021 data is that the pandemic was disrupting enrollment patterns and enrollment trends for institutions. This time period is of interest to the researcher in part, because of the disruption. The fall of 2021 was a difficult enrollment year throughout higher education (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). Those institutions that went against the trend of a second year of low enrollment were of interest to the researcher as there were seemingly so few IHEs with that achievement in the type of institution of the study, small private liberal arts institutions. In order to determine if enrollment success in the fall of 2021 reflected an enrollment anomaly, the researcher analyzed five years of enrollment data for each institution.

Selection Criteria

Strategic plans from small liberal arts colleges from across the United States were identified using the following selection criteria:

- Private non-profit institution;
- Total enrollment between 1,000 to 2,500 students
- Highest degree offered: master's degree;
- Carnegie Classification 2021 Baccalaureate Colleges: Arts & Sciences focus;
- Fall 2021 enrollment reported through the Integrated Postsecondary Education System (IPEDS) met both of the following conditions
 - Equal to or greater than its five-year average for fall enrollment

- Equal to or greater than its Fall 2020 enrollment;
- Fiscally responsible based upon five years of federal financial composite scores
 - All five years of composite scores were at or above the federal definition for stability, 1.5;
- Post a publicly available strategic plan on their website or social media.

The federal financial score is attributed to all IHEs receiving federal student aid and is determined through the annual audited financial statements of the IHE (United States Department of Education, n.d.). The Department of Education uses this score as one component of the standards used to determine the fiscal responsibility of the IHE (United States Department of Education, n.d.). The scale ranges from -1 to +3 with a score of 1.5 or above signally fiscal responsibility, 1 – 1.5 indicating the need for further financial oversight, and less than 1 are potentially barred from the Title IV programs that provide grants and loans for students (United States Department of Education, n.d.). The score provides a national standard for determining the fiscal health of IHEs (United States Department of Education, n.d.). While the financial scores are criticized for their methods and ability to forecast future financial stability, it is one of the only national indicators of the finances of IHEs (Fain & Lederman, 2020).

Selection of Cohort

The researcher utilized IPEDS and downloaded a list of the fall 2021 IHEs that met the initial criteria as listed in table 1. below. The complete list of 58 institutions is included in Appendix A. The researcher used the IPEDS system since all institutions use the same guidelines to submit their information regarding their students and campus.

Table 1

List of the criteria used in IPEDS.

Variables selected in IPEDS
Private not-for-profit, 4-year or above
Degree-granting
Baccalaureate Colleges: Arts & Sciences
Focus
1,000 - 4,999
Highest degree awarded: master's degree
Total Enrollment Fall 2021

Note. Variables as listed in IPEDS.

The researcher downloaded the data into excel spreadsheets for ease of use and analysis. The researcher eliminated seven IHEs (Bethune-Cookman University, Bucknell University, Colgate University, Furman University, Oberlin College, Stonehill College, and Trinity University) that did not meet the criteria regarding a total enrollment between 1,000 to 2,500 students.

When analyzing the five-year enrollment data of the remaining IHEs, the researcher used total enrollment counts from the fall semesters for the years 2017-2021. The researcher included IHEs that met both selection criteria related to enrollment, fall 2021 enrollment reported through the Integrated Postsecondary Education System (IPEDS) met both of the following conditions: equal to or greater than its five-year average for fall enrollment; and equal to or greater than its Fall 2020 enrollment. A table of the 51 institutions is included in Appendix B. Of the 51 institutions considered, 36 were removed from the cohort for failing to meet the following enrollment criteria.

- Three IHEs had a Fall 2021 enrollment that was greater than its five-year average but was less than its Fall 2020 enrollment

- Six IHEs had a Fall 2021 enrollment that was greater than Fall 2020 but was less than its
- five-year average for enrollment
- 27 IHEs has a Fall 2021 enrollment that was less than its five-year average and was less than its Fall 2020 enrollment

Appendix B includes data on the 51 institutions. The remaining IHEs established the initial cohort for the study. The following table illustrates the IHEs in the initial cohort based upon enrollment data from the fall semesters for the years 2017-2021.

Table 2

Enrollment information on the IHEs in the initial cohort.

Institution Name	Fall 2021	Fall 2020	Difference (2021-2020)	Five-year average	Difference (2021 - Five-year average)
Agnes Scott College	1,109	1,080	29	1,041	68
Claremont McKenna College	1,422	1,264	158	1,341	81
Colorado College	2,266	2,050	216	2,140	126
Cornell College	1,055	1,002	53	1,023	32
Georgetown College	1,625	1,565	60	1,610	15
Lake Forest College	1,690	1,583	107	1,578	112
Mount Holyoke College	2,342	2,040	302	2,270	72
Occidental College	1,964	1,839	125	1,938	26
Ouachita Baptist University	1,764	1,704	60	1,661	103
Reed College	1,566	1,385	181	1,479	87
Rhodes College	2,073	1,875	198	2,001	72
Sarah Lawrence College	1,766	1,506	260	1,669	97
Williams College	2,224	1,987	237	2,129	95

Note. Data collected from IPEDS.

In order to determine the fiscal stability of the initial cohort, the researcher utilized data shared on the federal student aid website related to the financial responsibility composite scores.

The researcher considered five years of data regarding the composite scores. After review of five years of federal financial composite scores, Georgetown College (KY), was removed from the cohort for failing to meet the following criteria, fiscally responsible based upon five years of federal financial composite scores with all five years of composite scores at or above the federal definition for stability, 1.5. Table 3 provides the data considered related to fiscal stability.

Table 3

Five years of composite scores for the IHEs in the cohort.

Institution	Federal Score 2020- 2021	Federal Score 2019- 2020	Federal Score 2018- 2019	Federal Score 2017- 2018	Federal Score 2016- 2017
Agnes Scott College	3.0	2.2	2.7	3.0	3.0
Claremont McKenna College	3.0	3.0	3.0	3.0	3.0
Colorado College	3.0	3.0	3.0	2.5	3.0
Cornell College	3.0	1.7	1.9	2.2	2.6
Georgetown College	3.0	2.0	1.2	2.7	1.9
Lake Forest College	3.0	2.2	2.6	3.0	3.0
Mount Holyoke College	3.0	2.5	3.0	3.0	3.0
Occidental College	3.0	2.0	3.0	3.0	3.0
Ouachita Baptist University	2.6	2.0	2.7	3.0	1.5
Reed College	3.0	2.3	3.0	3.0	3.0
Rhodes College	3.0	2.2	2.2	2.5	3.0
Sarah Lawrence College	2.5	2.4	3.0	3.0	2.5
Williams College	3.0	2.3	3.0	3.0	3.0

Note. Data from the United States Department of Education financial aid website.

After the fiscal analysis, the researcher utilizing the list of 12 IHEs to complete internet searches to determine if the IHEs met the final criteria for the cohort, post a publicly available strategic plan on their website or social media. One of the challenges faced by qualitative researchers can be locating and securing documents (Cresswell & Guetterman, 2018). For this reason, the researcher included publicly available strategic plans published on the IHEs websites. In addition to this accessibility, the published strategic plans document the institutional priorities and plans for both internal and external readers. The value of official organizational documents is that they contain information on functions, values, and perceptions of both insiders and external parties (McMillian & Schumacher, 2014). Documents created for external audiences provide the official perspectives of the organization (McMillian & Schumacher, 2014).

An additional challenge in document analysis is that the product to be analyzed may be forged or altered (Prior, 2003). The researcher used a search engine to find the official website for each IHE. Once located, the researcher checked the location (many institutions have similar names) to ensure it matched information from IPEDs. The researcher noted the website address to ensure that it included the *.edu* extension, typically used by education and that the address reflected the name of the IHE without misspellings. In addition, the researcher noted whether the webpage was copyrighted to the IHE. These actions were undertaken to ensure the researcher was accessing official websites of the IHEs.

Finding Artifacts

In order to complete the first step of finding artifacts (Bowen, 2009), the researcher searched each IHE's website for its strategic plan by using the IHE's search feature and including the term *strategic plan* and variations of the term including *strategy*, *planning*, or *vision*. If that effort failed, the researcher reviewed the webpages for the IHE's president,

governing board, institutional effectiveness, planning, external relations, or an *about* page to find a strategic plan. If those efforts failed to uncover a plan, the researcher conducted a general internet search with the IHEs name and variations on the term *strategic plan*.

Selecting Artifacts

Bowen (2009) indicated the second step in document analysis is to select the documents. After finding and completing a review of the information collected, the researcher removed three institutions from the cohort for the following reasons

- Claremont McKenna College posted a 2019 strategy report that did not clearly represent a strategic plan (Claremont McKenna College, 2019). The report was only found via institutional search engine and did not appear in the webpage directory for the college.
- Colorado College posted a plan for its Collaborative for Community Engagement (Colorado College, n.d.). The researcher read and reviewed the plan to determine that it was not for the entire college. For example, the vision statement for the plan, “The CCE seeks to advance the public purpose of the liberal arts education” (Colorado College, n.d.) was specific to the organization versus Colorado College.
- Sarah Lawrence College’s website included a plan from 2010-2017 (Sarah Lawrence College, n.d.) that was not included as it ended six years prior to the research study.

After completing the selection process for the cohort, the researcher secured the documents.

In document analysis, the researcher must ensure artifacts are in a usable format (McMillian & Schumacher, 2014). The researcher downloaded the strategic plans as a PDF or created a PDF

from the webpages hosting the plan. The following table includes information on the artifacts collected from the eight institutions in the cohort including the name of the institution, title of the strategic plan, years covered by the plan, format of the plan, and number of pages.

Table 4

Details on the strategic plan documents.

Institution Name	Title of Plan	Years	Format	Pages
Agnes Scott College	Pathway to Success	2021-2026	Website only	N/A
Cornell College	Bold Approaches That Enrich Lives: Cornell College's 2021-2024 Strategic Plan	2021-2024	White paper accessible via link on the website	4
Mount Holyoke College	The Plan for Mount Holyoke 2023	2020-2023	PDF accessible via link; outline on the website	9
Occidental College	The Occidental Promise	2024-2030	PDF accessible via link; outline on the website	51
Ouachita Baptist University	2023-2028 Strategic Plan	2023-2028	PDF accessible via link	2
Reed College	Reed College Strategic Plan	2022-current	PDF accessible via link on the IHE's website	15
Rhodes College	Achieving Our Best: A Strategic Plan for Rhodes College 2020-2030	2020-2030	PDF accessible via link; outline on the website	17
Williams College	Williams College Strategic Plan	2021-current	PDF accessible via link on the IHE's website and full plan on website	31

Note. Data from IHEs' strategic plans.

Institutions of Higher Education in Subject Cohort

The following descriptions detail the eight institutions selected for the research cohort. The cohort includes two women's institutions and four religiously affiliated organizations. Data included for each IHE includes geographic location, designation (co-educational or single gender), student enrollment as listed on IHE's website, number of undergraduate and graduate programs, unique features of curriculum, mission statement, external recognition, and religious affiliation.

Agnes Scott College

Located in Decatur, Georgia, Agnes Scott is a private women's college with 1,115 students, 34 undergraduate majors, and nine graduate and post-baccalaureate programs (Agnes Scott College, 2023b). The graduate programs are coeducational (Agnes Scott College, 2023b). The undergraduate students complete a core curriculum guided by a personal team of advisors and focused on leadership, professional success, and global opportunities, entitled SUMMIT (Agnes Scott College, 2023b). The board of trustees has recently revised Agnes Scott's mission statement which is

Agnes Scott College educates women to think deeply, live honorably and engage the intellectual and social challenges of their times.

- Agnes Scott College provides a dynamic liberal arts and sciences curriculum of the highest standards so that students and faculty can realize their full creative and intellectual potential.

- Agnes Scott College fosters an environment in which women can develop high expectations for themselves as individuals, scholars, professionals and citizens of the world.
- Agnes Scott College strives to be a just and inclusive community that expects honorable behavior, encourages spiritual inquiry and promotes respectful dialogue across differences.
- Agnes Scott College prepares students of all genders for success in their professions through graduate programs that emphasize dynamic learning in a diverse community (Agnes Scott College, 2024).

For six consecutive years, the College has been recognized by *U.S. News & World Report* as the most innovative liberal arts institution in the United States (Agnes Scott College, 2023c). Agnes Scott College indicates it is “founded in the Presbyterian tradition” and has an ordained chaplain on staff, however, they emphasize a welcoming community with numerous student organizations represented diverse faiths (Agnes Scott College, 2023a)

Cornell College

Cornell College in Mount Vernon, Iowa is a private co-educational four-year institution with 1,074 students (Cornell College, 2024a). Since 1978, they have followed a block plan for their semester in which students take one course at a time over for 18 days (Cornell College, 2023). The theme of their curriculum is centered around ingenuity which begins with a first-year seminar during the first block and requires applied learning experiences (Cornell College, 2023). Cornell offers over 55 areas of study for majors or minors as well as the option to individualize your major or attain a Bachelor of Special Studies (B.S.S.) by customizing your courses as well

as partnered pathways to graduate programs in business at other institutions (Cornell College, 2023). The mission of the college references innovation, “Cornell College offers an innovative and rigorous learning community where faculty and staff collaborate with students to develop the intellectual curiosity, creativity, and moral courage necessary for a lifetime of learning and engaged citizenship” (Cornell College, 2024b). Cornell highlights that they were the first in the United States to pay a professional salary for women that was equal to that of men (Cornell College, 2024a). Cornell is religiously affiliated with the United Methodist Church, welcoming to all or no religious traditions, and focusing on mutual understanding and respect for differences (Cornell College, 2024c).

Mount Holyoke College

Located in South Hadley, Massachusetts, Mount Holyoke College is a private women’s institution that admits students that are female, transgender, and nonbinary into their undergraduate program and offers some co-educational programs at the graduate level (Mount Holyoke College, 2021c). Over 2,209 undergraduate students choose from 48 majors and each student has an opportunity for a paid internship through their Lynk program (Mount Holyoke College, 2021c). Graduate programs in education are offered with 121 students currently enrolled (Mount Holyoke College, 2021c). The institution’s mission is, “Mount Holyoke, the leading gender-diverse women’s college, immerses students in a vibrant, intellectually adventurous global community to develop their voices and vision for the future, preparing them for lives of purposeful leadership in a culturally diverse world (Mount Holyoke College, 2021a). As a partner in the Five College Consortium, Mount Holyoke College students utilize the courses, faculty, and resources at Amherst, Hampshire and Smith Colleges, and the University of Massachusetts at Amherst (Mount Holyoke College, 2021b). Mount Holyoke is highly selective

among liberal arts college and is one of the “Seven Sisters” institutions established to provide women with an ivy league level education (Mount Holyoke College, 2023). Mount Holyoke is nondenominational (Mount Holyoke College, 2021c).

Occidental College

Located in Los Angeles, California, Occidental College is a private co-educational institution with 1,938 undergraduate students (Occidental College, 2024a). Students choose from 45 majors and minors and each student culminates their study through either a project or exam (Occidental College, 2024a). The institution’s mission statement is, “The mission of Occidental College is to provide a gifted and diverse group of students with a total educational experience of the highest quality – one that prepares them for leadership in an increasingly complex, interdependent and pluralistic world (Occidental College, 2024b). One of the programs of note is a campaign semester where they attain academic credits while working (unpaid) full-time on a campaign (Occidental College, 2024a). Occidental maximizes its location with internships, partnerships, and applied learning opportunities (Occidental College, 2024a). In addition, their homepage boasts the average of 292 days filled with sunshine at their campus (Occidental College, 2024a). Originally formed as a Presbyterian institution, it became unaffiliated in 1910 and offers non-denominational student support (Occidental College, 2024a).

Ouachita Baptist University

Located in Arkadelphia, Arkansas, Ouachita Baptist University is a private co-educational institution with 1,815 students in undergraduate and graduate programs, its largest enrollment since its previous high in 1966 (Lawson, 2023; Ouachita Baptist University, 2024a). Students choose from over 60 undergraduate programs in seven academic schools and seven graduate programs (Ouachita Baptist University, 2024a). Ouachita reintroduced graduate

curriculum in 2020 (Lawson, 2023). The university offers a specific program for undeclared majors to assist them to better understand themselves, explore careers, and discern their life purpose (Ouachita Baptist University, 2024b). The mission statement of the university is, “Ouachita Baptist University is a Christ-centered learning community. Embracing the liberal arts tradition, the university prepares individuals for ongoing intellectual and spiritual growth, lives of meaningful work, and reasoned engagement with the world” (Ouachita Baptist University, n.d.). Ouachita is ranked first for student satisfaction in Arkansas (Ouachita Baptist University, 2024a). Ouachita is affiliated with the Arkansas Baptist State Convention and also provides an intercultural office (Ouachita Baptist University, 2024a).

Reed College

Reed College in Portland, Oregon is a private, co-educational institution with 1,439 undergraduate students and 19 graduate students (Reed College, n.d.). The undergraduate program includes 38 majors and the ability to create your own major. Reed offers one graduate program in liberal studies (Reed College, n.d.). The mission statement of the institution is,

Reed College is an institution of higher education in the liberal arts devoted to the intrinsic value of intellectual pursuit and governed by the highest standards of scholarly practice, critical thought, and creativity. Its undergraduate program of study, leading to the degree of Bachelor of Arts, is demanding and intense and balances breadth of knowledge across the curriculum with depth of knowledge in a particular field of study. The goal of the Reed education is that students learn and demonstrate rigor and independence in their habits of thought, inquiry, and expression studies (Reed College, n.d.).

At Reed College, students receive feedback on their work rather than a letter grade; however, each student does receive a final grade for a course (Lydgate, 2021). They are they are the only liberal arts institution in the United States that operates a nuclear research reactor (Reed College, n.d.). Reed was established as a secular institution dedicated to equality (Reed College, n.d.)

Rhodes College

Rhodes College in Memphis, Tennessee is a private, co-educational institution with an enrollment of approximately 2,000 undergraduate and graduate students (Rhodes College, n.d.-a). Students choose from 70 majors and minors and have the opportunity to design a major (Rhodes College, n.d.-b). The Rhodes website does not include a mission statement, however, its vision is “Rhodes College aspires to graduate students with a lifelong passion for learning, a compassion for others, and the ability to translate academic study and personal concern into effective leadership and action in their communities and the world (Rhodes College, 2020). Rhodes has been recognized as a top music business school and for its internships, volunteering, and campus setting (Rhodes College, n.d.-a). In addition, the Fulbright Program recognizes Rhodes for its production of scholars and its study abroad programs (Rhodes College, n.d.-a). Rhodes is a Presbyterian affiliated institution (Rhodes College, n.d.-a).

Williams College

Located in Williamstown, Massachusetts, Williams College is a private, co-educational (originally established as a college for men) institution with 2,055 undergraduate and 56 graduate students with a 10% acceptance rate for admission (Williams College, n.d.-b.). Williams was the first American IHE to provide financial aid that was entirely grant based and did not require minimum contributions (Williams College, n.d.-b.). Williams offers undergraduates 37 majors and two graduate programs (Williams College, n.d.-b.). Williams highlights that it offers Oxford-

style tutorials throughout the disciplines and its alumni association is the oldest in the world (Williams College, n.d.-b.). The mission statement of the institution is “To develop in students both the wisdom and skills they will need to become responsible contributors to whatever communities they join, and the richly textured inner lives that will make them rigorously self-reflective, ethically alert, and imaginatively alive. Public and private purposes, as it were, harmoniously nurturing each other.” (Williams College, n.d.-a.). Williams is not religiously affiliated, but its Chaplains’ Office includes chaplains from protestant, Jewish, Catholic, and Muslim faith traditions (Williams College, 2024).

Appraisal of Artifacts

The third step to study documents as artifacts is appraisal and analysis (Bowen, 2009; McMillian & Schumacher, 2014). According to Bowen (2009), analysis includes “superficial examination, thorough examination, and interpretation” (p.32). Cresswell & Gutterman (2018) indicate the process for coding begins with a researcher gaining general perceptions of the data. The researcher initially reviewed each plan and read through hard copies. When conducting a second, more intentional reading of each plan, the researcher highlighted the occurrences of each target word and made general notations about the plans. This holistic review of the documents allowed the researcher to first determine whether or not the words or phrases were included, and which terms appeared in each plan. This initial review determined that all eight strategic plans included at least one of the target words. In addition, the researcher noted impressions of the plans including general perceptions which are included in table 5 below.

Table 5*Researcher impressions of the strategic plans of the IHEs in the study.*

Institution Name	Researcher Impressions
Agnes Scott College	The plan is succinct. It includes four strategic pillars (transformative education, pathways to success for every student, institutionalize a culture of community, and external engagement). Implementation initiatives are included for each pillar. There is a list of 15 key performance indicators for the plan. The plan includes images from its community and quotes from students.
Cornell College	The strategic plan is presented as a white paper from the president. It contains components of the plan, rationale, and data. The plan's stated purpose is to enhance curricular programs in order to sustain the IHE. It begins with areas of immediate emphasis related to finances, enrollment, and organizational structure. The plan lists three primary strategies (respond to students' wants and needs; expand and diversify markets; and change the way things are done). Each strategy has priorities. Assessment strategies are listed. The plan references mission and vision but does not include those official statements. The plan is text only.
Mount Holyoke College	The plan is detailed and provides specific actions. The plan has four strategic priorities (lead with distinction, global excellence, inclusive and collaborative community, and effectiveness and fiscal sustainability). Each priority includes three to four initiatives and the initiatives each have a list of up to ten actions. There is a section on implementation. The plan references its mission but does not include the statement. The plan has images of its community.
Occidental College	The plan is comprehensive providing history, details, and data throughout the document. The plan has three promises (academic excellence, community relationships, and educating the whole student and renewing community). Strategies are included with each promise. Sections are included for an "equity lens" and "sustainability lens" for each promise. Evaluation strategies are included. The plan references mission and paraphrases a component of it without including the full statement. It includes numerous images of its community.

Institution Name	Researcher Impressions
Ouachita Baptist University	The plan is succinct. The plan begins with seven strategies with four goals under each strategy. The strategies are sustaining Christ-centered identity; steward resources; enrich faculty/staff experiences; ensure transformative learning; optimize residential enrollment; grow graduate/online education; and strengthen partnerships. It includes its vision, mission, and values. It includes separate learning goals for undergraduate and graduate students. It is text only.
Reed College	The plan is comprehensive. It provides history of the planning as well as institution. In the first section, it includes discussion on revenue and enrollment. It includes three primary sections (context; strategic opportunity; and proposed steps and challenges). It offers context as well as concrete steps to be taken for each section. The plan references its mission and in one area paraphrases a component of the mission statement but does not include the statement. It is text only.
Rhodes College	The plan is comprehensive. It begins and ends with a narrative related to the IHEs "best day" which is in the future. The plan references maximizing revenue streams to alleviate tuition pressure for students. The plan includes four foci (academic and creative excellence; culture of belonging; student experiences in support of graduate and career readiness; and securing the future). It begins with the IHE's vision and references mission throughout without indicating there is a separate mission statement from the vision. Appendices include the IHEs core commitments; challenges related to demographics and discount rate; timeline and structure used to develop the plan. The plan is text only; appendices include figures.
Williams College	The plan is comprehensive providing historical context and details throughout the document. The plan is divided into sections on co-curriculum and residential life; access and affordability; engaging alumni; crosscutting commitments; the structure to sustain the plan; and funding the plan. The plan references but does not state the mission. Appendices are listed and can be linked from the website they include eight working group reports and four strategic academic initiative reports. The plan is text only.

The researcher uploaded the eight strategic plans into the software program MAXQDA 24 to assist with the organization of codes. MAXQDA 24 was selected after the researcher tested two other software programs for the research. MAXQDA is ideally suited for use with qualitative document analysis as data of all types can be imported into the software for analysis and the program allows for including and modifying the coding system and memos (MAXQDA, 2024). The researcher did not utilize AI Assist options for coding or summarizing data, rather utilized the software to capture and organize codes assigned by the researcher and to document the researcher's comments and memos.

Coding Strategy

Coding is the process by which a researcher analyzes qualitative data, typically text or visual artifacts, by labeling a portion of the data with a symbol (commonly a word or phrase) that notes attributes found in a portion of the data being analyzed (Saldaña, 2015). Coding enables the researcher to discern commonalities within the data including themes, patterns, categorizations, theories, or assertions (Saldaña, 2015). Provisional coding employs a set list of codes to be applied to the text or artifact (Saldaña, 2015). The predetermined codes are generated through prior research, studies, literature reviews, or the researcher's knowledge (Saldaña, 2015). In provisional coding, the researcher begins by applying specific codes to the data, but as the analysis continues, the codes can be changed to include fewer, newer, or modified from the original set used for initial research (Saldaña, 2015).

The researcher identified pre-selected codes for each of the target words, *innovation*, *entrepreneur*, or *transformation* or their derivatives. When the researcher identified one of the target words, she noted the first example phrase or sentence along with any identified themes in the paragraph or section of the document. For example, when the phrase was included in the

heading of a section, its placement was noted, and the entirety of the section was reviewed for themes and corresponding codes. Each new theme in the section was noted. If the researcher labeled a code as a parent code with connected subcodes, she documented the rationale for the decision. The procedure was followed to analyze every occurrence in each of the eight artifacts. The researcher kept a research journal detailing the process and noted any themes that were challenging to determine and how choices were made. Examples of coding will be included in the discussion of findings.

After initial coding, it is typical for researchers to reduce the number of codes to a few dozen by merging codes, eliminating redundancies, and reducing others (Cresswell & Guetterman, 2018). MAXQDA software was helpful for this process as it provided tools to visualize intersections of codes as well as identify once mentioned codes to be merged or eliminated. Here too, the software is helpful as the researcher activated codes that were a priority without having to actually eliminate non-priority codes. Through the MAXQDA software, phrase or sentence segments were marked along with and in support of codes. The researcher reviewed codes to group together similar content areas in order to generate primary and secondary themes (Cresswell & Guetterman, 2018). After initial review of the key words, the researcher analyzed the entirety of the artifacts noting if the themes identified specific to the key words were reflective of the entirety of the plans. The final step, synthesizing data found in the documents (Bowen, 2009) is described in the section on discussion of findings. Analysis of the themes was conducted through the lens of institutional theory and the constructs of social change as presented by Scott (2010).

Credibility, Transferability, Dependability and Confirmability

The researcher took actions to ensure the trustworthiness of the research through the consideration of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, concepts proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985). In order to establish credibility, the researcher included the data pulled from IPEDS in appendices and provided clear explanations as to how the cohort was established. In addition, she reviewed the websites for each IHE to determine the plans were official documents and included information that was similar to the plans. A colleague served as a reviewer throughout the research study to add additional credibility. The colleague is both an administrator in higher education with experience in campus planning as well as a consultant for organizational planning. She noted areas where the researcher needed to provide additional evidence; for example, she noted the need for more evidence to support the section on financial challenges facing small institutions.

To provide transferability, the researcher used clear documentation of the steps taken to establish the cohort of IHEs and provided quotes from the plans in the findings (Cresswell & Guetterman, 2018). The researcher provided detailed descriptions of the actions she took throughout the process as well as including coding information for the themes of the study to provide dependability. The researcher clarified her bias through the researcher's positionality section and provided limitations of the study to ensure confirmability (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Ethical Considerations

All materials analyzed were publicly available on institutional websites or from federal agencies. Although there is not potential for harm to human subjects, the researcher analyzed the data in an ethical manner to mitigate biases.

Limitations

Limitations on the research study include a relatively small cohort of eight institutions that included specific classifications related to academic program, degrees, and student population. The researcher was the only person reviewing and coding data which limits the analysis. The requirement that strategic plans must be publicly available limited the number of IHEs included in the analysis. Document analysis relies upon the perceptions of the researcher, which will vary by person (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The researcher was not privy to the actual processes utilized to create the strategic plans at each institution. In addition, initial research focused only on enrollment between fall of 2020 and 2021. Upon the recommendation of committee members and the colleague reviewer, the researcher expanded data collection to five years of enrollment history and financial composite scores to multiple years to provide more information on the IHEs' history. The researcher initially utilized different research software before changing to MAXQDA.

Research Positionality

The selection of IHEs that have already incorporated professional programs into their liberal arts curriculum creates the potential for institutional bias toward a propensity for innovation. This category of IHE was selected as I, the researcher, am employed at Concordia College, an IHE that is included in this category. Similar to Albion, Concordia has an emphasis on career and recently articulated an institutional priority on Learn, Work, Lead (Concordia College, 2022). I work in the grants profession, which is an avenue for incorporating change at an organization. I have served as a strategic planning facilitator for divisions of the institution and for non-profit organizations. The research provided insights and guidance into the future priorities and grant seeking strategies of small institutions.

I am a white, cisgender woman from a middle-class background. As a graduate of a private liberal arts college, former admissions representative for that institution, and current employee, I have favorable biases related to small, private, liberal arts institutions, the focus of this research. As an experienced grants professional, I utilize strategic plans in my work and highly value them as a representative of the vision and values for an entity. These experiences have shaped the focus and design of the research and provide an insider point of view as to the importance of the research findings. I am aware that my viewpoint may impact the interpretation of the results and worked to mitigate the biases through examination by external reviewers.

Research Findings

In the following section, research findings are detailed related to analysis of the strategic plans as documents, the key words studied, the themes uncovered in relation to individual key terms, themes found in relation to all of the key terms, and themes found in each strategic plan.

Documents

Review of the documents produced an observation related to the length of the documents. The eight strategic plans varied in length, including Occidental College's plan of 51 pages and Ouachita Baptist University's plan of two pages. Since one of the IHEs was on the webpage only, the researcher considered additional details on the documents including word length which is represented in table six below. In her article on the trends impacting small colleges, Marcy (2023) notes many colleges are using shorter strategic plans rather than the prior trend of plans that include extensive lists of potential and planned initiatives. Analysis of the eight strategic plans illustrates that less than half of the cohort is following this trend toward more targeted strategic plans. With two plans (Agnes Scott College and Ouachita Baptist University) including less than 1,000 words in their plans; two plans (Occidental College and Williams College) follow

a traditional model of extensive plans with over 13,000 words; and the remaining four plans (Cornell College, Mount Holyoke College, Reed College and Rhodes College) approximately 2,000 – 6,500 words.

Table 6

Details on IHEs’ strategic plans.

Document Name	Pages	Paragraphs	Sentences	Words
Agnes Scott College	N/A	138	174	853
Cornell College	4	71	218	1984
Mount Holyoke College	9	95	304	2285
Occidental College	51	434	1872	14201
Ouachita Baptist University	2	64	106	835
Reed College	15	300	1185	6556
Rhodes College	17	185	648	5132
Williams College	31	441	1886	13092

Note. Data is from MAXQDA report.

Key Words

The analysis of frequency of key words supported findings from the research question as they address whether or not the strategic plans indicate anything about innovation, entrepreneurship, and transformation. The researcher’s codebook is included in Appendix C.

Derivatives of Terms

In the research process, each key word and its derivatives were searched and coded as the word itself. The primary search term was coded as a parent code and the derivatives were labeled as subcodes. The following data was found for the total coding of all 8 strategic plans

- Numerical count for frequency of the word “innovate” and its derivatives: 31;
- Numerical count for the frequency of the word “entrepreneur” and its derivatives: 6;
- Numerical count for the frequency of the word “transformation” and its derivatives: 21.

The following figures are included to provide further information related to the derivatives found for each key word. Figure 1 illustrates the subcodes for study of the word “innovate” in the research.

Figure 1

Subcodes for “innovate”

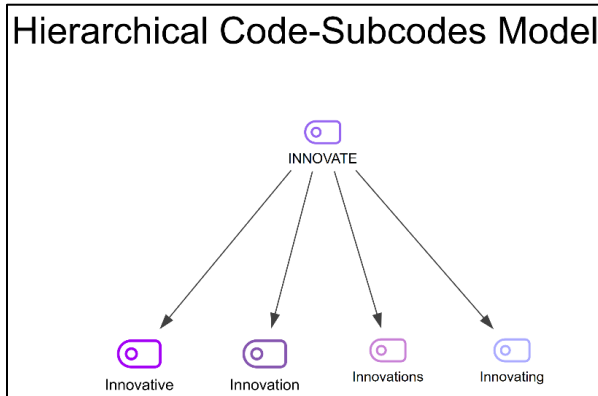


Figure 2 illustrates the subcodes for study of the word “entrepreneur” in the research.

Figure 2

Subcodes for “entrepreneur”

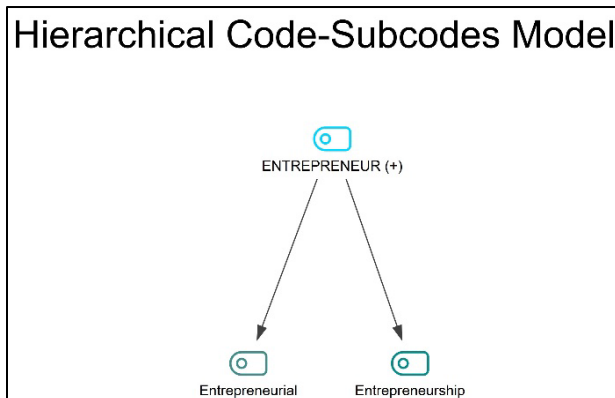
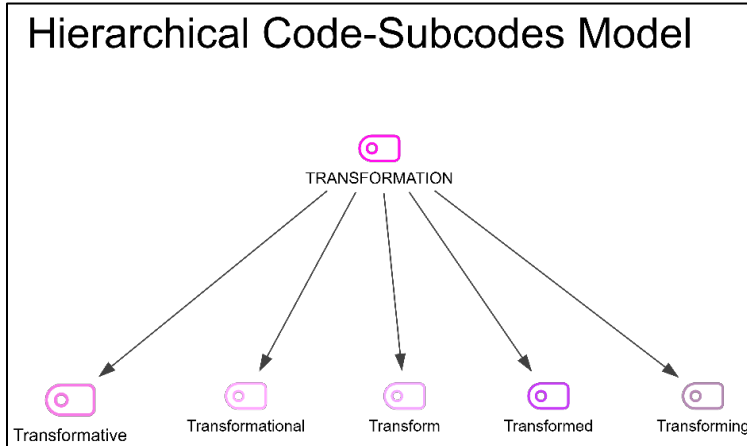


Figure 3 illustrates the subcodes for study of the word “transformation” in the research.

Figure 3

Subcodes for “transformation”



The next section details the codes, coding, and themes related to the key terms. Once a key term was identified, the researcher identified and coded themes of the sentence, paragraph, or section where the word occurred. The following section details the most frequent theme connected to each key term.

Innovation Themes

Innovation is the most frequently used term of the three studied with 31 segments identified in six of the strategic plans. This frequency of usage aligns with literature indicating innovation is often cited as the solution for higher education’s problems in general as well as for small colleges (Eide, 2018; Marcus, 2018; Mintz, 2021; Pulsipher & Stowers, 2021; Wingard, 2022; Zhao & Watterston, 2021).

Table 7

Frequency counts for “innovate” and its derivatives.

Institution	Frequency count for <i>Innovate</i>
Agnes Scott College	0
Cornell College	3
Mount Holyoke College	5
Occidental College	12
Ouachita Baptist University	0
Reed College	1
Rhodes College	2
Williams College	8
SUM	31

Note. Report generated from MAXQDA.

The theme most often associated with innovation is academic curriculum and programs for example, Cornell College’s plan indicates in its introduction, “The purpose of our three-year plan is to create innovative and differentiating curricular and co-curricular opportunities and operational excellence approaches necessary for Cornell to be financially and operationally sustainable for the long-term” (Brand, 2021). Other institutional plans included initiatives to, “Further develop our practices in and innovative approaches to teaching and learning, including effective assessment and evaluation, to increase the impact and improve the outcomes of learning experiences on and off campus” (Mount Holyoke College, 2020). Williams College (2021) uses innovation to describe academic initiatives, “Broadly interdisciplinary, innovative, and steeped in the humanities, they are perfect examples of Williams as a home for the “living liberal arts.”

Entrepreneurship Themes

While only six segments in four of the strategic plans included references to entrepreneur or its derivatives, the references were related to curricular approaches or programs. It is notable that Rhodes College intends to implement an entrepreneurial approach to their program

development to establish new revenue sources and shares an example, “Already we have developed a master’s degree in urban education and a post-baccalaureate certificate for aspiring medical professionals Health Equity that can serve as templates for other concepts” (Rhodes College, 2020). Reed College (2022) uses *entrepreneurial* as an adjective to describe projects included in applied learning or in their words, “significant workplace experience.” Mount Holyoke College (2020) aims to develop an academic program in entrepreneurship and enhance the entrepreneurship of its campus body. Reed College includes “commercially viable entrepreneurial project” as an applied learning work experience for students (2022).

Table 8

Frequency counts for derivatives of “entrepreneur.”

Institution	Frequency count for <i>Entrepreneur</i>
Agnes Scott College	0
Cornell College	0
Mount Holyoke College	2
Occidental College	0
Ouachita Baptist University	0
Reed College	1
Rhodes College	1
Williams College	2
SUM	6

Note. Report generated from MAXQDA.

Transformation Themes

The term transformation was identified in 21 segments of five of the strategic plans. Agnes Scott College includes transformation in its first strategic pillar, “Provide every student with a Transformative Education that prepares the student for success in their professional, civic and personal lives.” Ouachita Baptist College (2023) includes the strategic goal to “ensure

transformational learning” through multiple initiatives related to student learning (including in a Christian tradition), teaching, scholarship, high-impact educational activities, and co-curriculars.

It is notable that with the study of transformation, the external community is considered, “Some crucial areas to explore include partnerships with arts and cultural institutions, which can provide transformative learning experiences for our students. These innovative educational opportunities are rooted in our location in one of the world's premier arts capitals and cultural centers” (Occidental College, 2023). Transformation is primarily related to students and the experiences that will help students with post-graduation opportunities.

Table 9

Frequency count for “transformation” and its derivatives.

Institution	Frequency count for <i>Transformation</i>
Agnes Scott College	1
Cornell College	0
Mount Holyoke College	0
Occidental College	5
Ouachita Baptist University	1
Reed College	0
Rhodes College	8
Williams College	6
SUM	21

Note. Report generated from MAXQDA.

Overall Strategic Plan Themes

The researcher considered all of the identified themes related to the key terms found in the eight documents to identify themes found connected to multiple key terms. Four overall themes intertwined with innovation, entrepreneurship, and transformation were observed through the majority of the artifacts 1) Student learning with an emphasis on post-graduation and career readiness; 2) Enhancements to academic curriculum; and 3) Faculty teaching and pedagogy with

a focus on applied learning; and 4) Challenges faced by the IHEs. Example segments for the primary three themes are detailed in Table 10 and Table 11.

Table 10

Three overall themes for the entire research study.

Primary Themes	Example Segments
Theme 1 Student Learning & Career Readiness	<p>Fortifying student learning through an exceptional education in the Christian liberal arts tradition</p> <p>Transformative learning through Christian liberal arts tradition.</p> <p>Invest in supporting students' career preparation</p> <p>Ensure a transformational student experience to support graduate and career readiness</p> <p>Integrate professional success elements into majors and graduate programs.</p>
Theme 2 Academic Curriculum	<p>Develop or enrich academic programs in areas of strength or need, such as film and media studies, environmental studies, entrepreneurship.</p> <p>Focuses on the strengths of the IHE's signature curriculum with an applied learning component.</p> <p>Curriculum shaped by faculty commitments to innovation, research, and creativity in all disciplines.</p> <p>Use co-curricular and athletic programs to further institutional learning goals.</p> <p>Create a center for learning and teaching to support excellence and innovation in teaching. Expand faculty development opportunities.</p>
Theme 3 Teaching & Pedagogy	<p>Enhancing teaching, learning, creative expression and scholarship across the university.</p> <p>New approach to faculty workload that creates conditions for faculty to achieve success.</p> <p>Further develop our practices in and innovative approaches to teaching and learning, including effective assessment and evaluation, to increase the impact and improve the outcomes of learning experiences on and off campus.</p> <p>Elevating high-impact educational practices as a distinctive feature for students</p>

Note. Data collected from publicly available strategic plans.

Student Learning

Students and academics are the only two parent codes found in all eight strategic plans. The primary themes that arose related to students are a focus on student learning and an emphasis on post-graduate success including references to future work, non-traditional terminology for liberal arts institutions (Hirt, 2006). Rhodes College (2020) references positive alumni outcomes and indicates, “We aim to be more deliberate as we highlight the paths that lead from the classroom and the laboratory to civic life and the global market.”

Academic Curriculum

The themes related to enhancing the academics and curriculum for students are building upon current strengths at the institutions, opportunities in the external communities, and a focus on preparing students for future work. Rhodes College (2020) noted, “Our curriculum is shaped by a faculty committed to undergraduate teaching excellence in the arts and sciences, original research, innovation, and creativity across the disciplines. This combination of intensive work with faculty on campus and engagement off campus in our city, nation, and world is an extraordinary opportunity for students.”

Curriculum distinguishes some of the IHEs. Agnes Scott College (2021) references providing a transformative curriculum known as SUMMIT which is explained as “global learning, inclusive leadership” along with “concentrated work in liberal arts disciplines and conversations across differences” are cited as preparing students for future success. Agnes Scott established the program in 2015 after faculty integrated leadership and global into the curriculum and courses (Biemiller, 2018). The distinctive curriculum garnered attention including from the American Council on Education and Fidelity Investments which awarded Agnes Scott a “Transformation Award” in 2017 (Biemiller, 2018).

Teaching and Pedagogy

The importance of faculty is exemplified by IHEs investing in their scholarship and development (Mount Holyoke, 2020; Occidental College, 2023; Williams College, 2021). Three of the IHEs also intend to establish centers or an institute dedicated to enhancing teaching (Mount Holyoke 2020; Occidental College, 2023; Rhodes College, 2020).

For many of the IHEs in the study, maintaining a small ratio of faculty to students and providing opportunities for shared research and academic engagement is a priority. Rhodes (2020) indicates these opportunities are an institutional strength, “Collaborating with faculty on cutting-edge projects and emerging questions gives Rhodes students an advantage in applying to graduate and professional programs.”

Applied learning is the pedagogy referenced most often and is at times connected to career readiness and experiences in the community. The IHEs refer to high-impact practices that provide opportunities to put theory into practice. Williams College (2021) indicates, “Williams needs to grow and expand these opportunities, ensuring that every student gains crucial experience in research, tutorials, engaged learning, study away, entrepreneurship or other modes of ‘learning by doing.’ In order to do this work well, the college will support efforts to enhance and expand our existing collaborations among faculty and student facing offices, including the Center for Learning in Action (CLiA), the Fellowships Office, Study Away, the ’68 Center for Career Exploration, the Zilkha Center and the Davis Center.”

Transparency of Difficulties and Challenges

The majority (five of the eight IHEs) referenced challenges or difficulties they are facing, these references are notable in this study which focuses on innovation, entrepreneurship, and transformation. Table 11 illustrates the research related to transparency of challenges.

Table 11

Fourth overall theme for entire research study.

Primary Theme	Subthemes or Example Segments
	Areas of immediate need include balanced operating goals and recruitment and retention goals.
Theme 4 Difficulties & Challenges	<p>We will meet this time of urgency in higher education</p> <p>We do not have good alignment between student interest and enrollments and faculty resources, and we lack flexibility for faculty to accommodate their and their students' interests in interdisciplinary programs.</p> <p>Structural challenges for student learning such as summer and January courses; problems with barriers related to required year-long courses.</p> <p>Difficulty of decision making through shared governance. Innovation is hard when you have to ask everyone's opinion.</p> <p>External factors including the pandemic; racism and the need for equality and justice; globalization; resistance to knowledge/expertise; climate change; technology, and the economy.</p>

Note. Data collected from publicly available strategic plans.

Difficulties referenced include demographics, competition, and the lack of understanding of the value of the liberal arts. Exemplified by Rhodes College (2020),

While we believe our best days lie ahead, the challenges related to the future demographics of our country and the economics of private higher education are real. Beginning in 2026, the nation will experience a significant population downturn, of approximately 12% to 15%, in the number of high school seniors as a result of a decrease in birthrates during the Great Recession that began in 2008. It is exciting to contemplate a student population that will be more diverse. These students will expect a curriculum and

pedagogy that acknowledges that diversity, and competition among colleges to enroll them will become even more fierce.

The challenges are most often external challenges, however, there is also an acknowledgement of the internal challenges including structural such as the academic calendar or lack of sufficient resources for academic programs popular with students (Rhodes, 2020).

Themes in Strategic Plans

In addition to themes related to key terms and overall findings of the study, themes were identified for each strategic plan and notations regarding how they contributed to the white paper in Artifact III. The table below includes details of the findings.

Table 12

Themes in each plan and how they informed Artifact III.

Institution	Themes	Informed Artifact III
Agnes Scott College	Student Learning; Preparing students for post-graduation success; Community on campus.	Student learning that includes applied learning; career focused curriculum
Cornell College	Preparing students for post-graduation. Difficulties and Challenges; Applied Learning;	Student learning that includes applied learning; career focused curriculum; honesty related to difficulties and challenges
Mount Holyoke College	Preparing students for post-graduation; Applied Learning; Inclusive community	Student learning that includes applied learning; career focused curriculum; location enhances learning;
Occidental College	Career focused curriculum; Applied learning/high impact practices; Community partnerships	Student learning that includes applied learning; career focused curriculum; location enhances learning; honesty related to difficulties and challenges

Institution	Themes	Informed Artifact III
Ouachita Baptist University	Religious focused curriculum and learning; High impact practices; Community partnerships	Student learning that includes applied learning; location enhances learning
Reed College	Preparing students for post-graduation; Difficulties and challenges; Applied and collaborative learning	Student learning that includes applied learning; location enhances learning; honesty related to difficulties and challenges
Rhodes College	Preparing students for post-graduation; Difficulties and challenges; Career focused curriculum	Student learning that includes applied learning; career focused curriculum; location enhances learning; honesty related to difficulties and challenges
Williams College	Academic excellence; High impact practices/applied learning; Community on and off campus;	Student learning that includes applied learning; career focused curriculum; location enhances learning; honesty related to difficulties and challenges

Note. Analysis based on information from IHEs strategic plans.

This concludes the section providing details on the findings from the document analysis of strategic plans. The next section will provide discuss the findings and implications.

Discussion of Findings

The following discussion interprets findings relevant to the research questions through the lens of institutional theory and according to Scott (2010) the features necessary for social change in an institution. The common strategy for IHEs to utilize research and best practices from peer institutions illustrates Scott's (2008) concept of cognitive or mimetic isomorphism as IHEs are adapting by learning from their peers which contributes to similarity between the organizations. One of the challenges for this study is the institutions were selected because they

are in the same Carnegie classification, which aligns with concerns by Hambrick et al (2004) that studies identify isomorphism in entities that already exhibit similar structures. While the practice of presenting successful strategies of other IHEs in itself is a form of mimetic isomorphism, multiple organizations are striving to distinguish themselves and become more heterogenous, aligning with counter criticism of institutional theory (Hambrick et.al., 2004).

The research uncovered innovation is most frequently connected to students, with a focus on student learning and post-graduate success; curriculum; teaching and pedagogy. The research questions will be discussed as part of the Discussion of Findings.

Research Questions Discussion

The following section analyzes the findings from the research study in order to answer the research questions.

PRQ: What do small private liberal arts institutions' strategic plans if any, indicate about innovation, entrepreneurship, and transformation through the document analysis and frequency of the terms and the contexts in which they are used?

To address the first component of the question, all eight strategic plans included at least one of the key words studied. Please see figure 4 below for a report on the count of frequencies in each of the plans. The length of the strategic plans is not included in the chart nor was it considered in the research. Therefore, the researcher focused on the content versus the number of times the key words were found in each plan. The chart below is included as evidence that each institution in the cohort had at minimum one of the key words in their strategic plan. This helps answer a part of the question related to whether any words were included in plans.

Although two of the plans, Agnes Scott College and Ouachita Baptist University only included one instance of a key word in their plan, in both plans, the word “transformation” is

included in a section heading and the researcher included the contents of the section as well as the entirety of the plans to confirm findings.

Table 13

Key word frequencies for strategic plans.

Institution	Entrepreneur	Innovate	Transformation	SUM
Agnes Scott College	0	0	1	1
Cornell College	0	3	0	3
Mount Holyoke College	2	5	0	7
Occidental College	0	12	5	17
Ouachita Baptist University	0	0	1	1
Reed College	1	1	0	2
Rhodes College	1	2	8	11
Williams College	2	8	6	16
SUM	6	31	21	58

Note. Data derived from research project file in MAXQDA.

In the components of the plans related to innovation and entrepreneurship, the primary focus is students with a strong emphasis on assisting with their career readiness and learning. The emphasis on learning outcomes and their application post-graduation is valuable. Through their strategic plans, the IHEs are promoting a message that they intend to assist their students beyond graduation.

Student Outcomes Post-graduation

When considering innovation and transformation, IHEs in the study focused on student outcomes post-graduation, illustrating their thoughtful consideration of the impact of their education and community. Initiatives on post-graduation requires planning for 4-5 years of student learning and experiences. There are not quick fixes, but concentrated efforts to scaffold education for their students who enter with plans for their future and an institution working to prepare them for careers not yet imagined.

It is interesting to note that references to student learning in relation to the key words utilizes the campus and community beyond the traditional classroom. For example, Ouachita Baptist University (2023) calls for “utilizing co-curricular and athletic programs to contribute to the university’s learning goals.” More common are references to communities beyond campus whether local, national, or global. Cornell College indicates, their strategic plan includes “a recognition that we must innovate around the nature of work, culture, and community.”

There is a recognition not only of the importance of students gaining real world experience, but the importance of ensuring all students are able to participate, not just those that can afford to take unpaid internships through programs to pay for the internships or provide a stipend. For example, Reed College (2022) pledges to, “COMMIT funding and staffing support so that at least two-thirds of the student body have a significant workplace experience during their years at Reed, including a paid or unpaid internship (Reed stipend), fellowship, research, or artistic, socially, or commercially viable entrepreneurial project.”

Career Focused Curriculum

Traditionally, liberal arts institutions have focused more on the theories and skills students will develop than future careers, however it is apparent that at these IHEs, they have adopted a focus not only on career, but jobs. In fact, references to future work and in some cases workforce needs appear in eight strategic plans for example, “Develop or enrich academic programs in areas of strength or need, such as film and media studies, environmental studies, entrepreneurship and international business, global health, data and computer sciences, gender studies, and ethnic studies” (Mount Holyoke College, 2020).

In institutional theory Scott (2010, p.17) notes an important component of understanding social change is, “detailed attention to existing institutional variety at the organization, sector

field, or societal level.” At the societal level, many of the IHEs were focused on workforce needs at all levels. In the components of the plans related to innovation and entrepreneurship, the primary focus is students with a strong emphasis on assisting with their career readiness and learning. The emphasis on learning outcomes and their application post-graduation is valuable. There is a clear message that the IHEs focus is not just enrolling and graduating students, but helping them to find work, including in sought after areas by job seekers and employers.

The IHEs in the study vary by the degree to which they emphasize the liberal arts in their promotional materials, but at Williams College (2021), they connect future career and the curriculum, “Invest in supporting students’ career preparation through interviewing, networking, resume building and exploration, including entrepreneurial opportunities that reflect the creative and translational spirit of a liberal arts education.” Through their initiative, Williams is focusing on the employability of liberal arts graduates. This focus on student outcomes and connections to work is illustrated through applied learning, internships, and programming with their communities.

Knowledge for its own sake is unsustainable and for the privileged few, instead, the IHEs in the study are assisting students as they apply knowledge to improve themselves, develop in-demand skills, and prepare for careers. When citing the benefits of their education, Rhodes College (2020) indicates alumni report, “life-long employability, and career advancement as a result of their Rhodes education” and Reed College (2022) cites the varied careers of their graduates as evidence of their curricular success. Williams College (2021) includes an initiative to “invest in supporting students’ career preparation” in a section related to entrepreneurial opportunities. Reed College (2022) indicates, “Students and families make significant investments of time and money to attend Reed, and they want to emerge from college with skills

and connections to begin work, to make contributions soon after graduation, and to live meaningful and rewarding lives” and “In a knowledge-based economy, the skills Reed students learn are immediately valuable to engaging in purposeful work, and Reed students are eager to use these skills to advance society.” (Reed College, 2022)

Scott (2010, p. 17) names the value of an “appreciation of the temporal nature of social life, the ongoing effects of the past on the present and future” for the features of change. Cornell College illustrates their understanding of the past, “The vision is exciting and directive, and the plan comes with bold elements: a cutting-edge student debt management plan; Cornell’s Ingenuity curriculum, including the Ingenuity in Action component; a commitment to maximizing our One Course At A Time methodology; a recognition that we must innovate around the nature of work, culture, and community; and, finally, a willingness to rethink what it means to teach, mentor, and advise, especially under One Course At A Time” (Brand, 2021). Cornell’s block plan referred to above was implemented in 1978 (Cornell College, 2023) and their plan reflects this continuation of historical structure while they seek a new future for their institution through innovation that recognizes the need to reconsider how they have historically operated.

Teaching and Pedagogy

Small colleges in particular, focus on student collaborations with faculty and staff as a hallmark of its education (Hirt, 2006), which illustrates both interdependence and interaction between the organized units of students and faculty, a component needed for change in institutional theory (Scott 2010, p. 17). The importance of faculty connections and mentoring with students is expensive, but many of the IHEs believe the investment pays off. Williams College (2021) states, “Williams has long believed that students learn best by working directly

and closely with faculty pushing the scholarly and creative frontiers. This is a labor-intensive mode of education that requires a low ratio of students to faculty. But it would be a mistake to misread the effort as inefficiency: Our program is profoundly and distinctively transformative.”

The pedagogy connected to innovation most often detailed in the strategic plans was related to applied learning opportunities and high-impact educational practices. Based on research these types of educational experiences result in positive student and societal outcomes (Guo-Brennan, 2022; Kuh, 2008; Kuh, 2013; Lanning & Brown, 2019; Rush & Landgraf, 2023; Wismath & Newberry, 2019). This aligns with a feature of institutional change described by Scott (2010, p. 18) as, “an awareness that processes may produce convergence of procedures and forms but also promote diversity and the emergence of new types of social behavior and novel systems.” Occidental illustrates its understanding of the multiple impacts of curriculum that is collaborative with their community and implements applied learning pedagogy will have,

Some crucial areas to explore include partnerships with arts and cultural institutions, which can provide transformative learning experiences for our students. These innovative educational opportunities are rooted in our location in one of the world's premier arts capitals and cultural centers. By expanding current formal partnerships and forging new ones, the College will enhance the capacity to embed student research skills in the curriculum and to develop internships, while local arts and cultural institutions will benefit from the collaboration with students and faculty who conduct research in their collections and contribute to projects in consultation with curators and staff. (Occidental College, 2024).

The IHEs present these applied learning opportunities as mutually beneficial as they provide learning experiences for students and benefited the communities or organizations hosting the

experiences. In addition, curriculum is designed with workforce needs in the future and aligns with research on what employers are seeking in employees (Baker & Baldwin, 2014; Finley et al., 2021; Finley, 2021). However, equity is also a concern related to high-impact practices to ensure all students have opportunities to participate (Guo-Brennan, 2022; Kuh, 2013; Rush & Landgraf, 2023). The need to secure and/or invest resources to ensure access to high-impact practices including research, study abroad, internships, fellowships, and community service is addressed by multiple institutions in their planning (Occidental College, 2023; Rhodes College, 2020; Williams College, 2021).

Transparency of Challenges and Difficulties

The inclusion of the realities being faced by the IHEs illustrates careful analysis of the institution's current status in higher education, often an acknowledgement of the challenges facing higher education in general, and a willingness to show transparency and vulnerabilities, while remaining hopeful through strategies to overcome the difficulties. Although this is a small sample of institutions, the inclusion of challenges in public strategic plans is contrary to conventional wisdom and history as experts explain, "Potential students and donors are not likely to open their checkbooks to an institution whose future appears shaky" and further indicate, "So, struggling institutions' leaders may wait to publicly acknowledge that reality until the very last hope for recovery had faded" (Zemsky et al., 2020).

One important component of social change in institutional theory is "awareness of the effects of non-local, as well as local factors" (Scott, 2010, p. 17). The IHEs that call for innovation or transformation across their institutions illustrate the awareness of community demographics and national trends in higher education. Rhodes College (2020) addresses external challenges, "Broader economic and cultural concerns also impact the future of Rhodes.

Commonplace skepticism about the liberal arts and sciences as the best approach to higher education misleads the public about the value of Rhodes and our sister institutions. The market for higher education has become noisier and more competitive. Rhodes must work ever harder to tell its story in a compelling and visible manner.”

In institutional theory, the concept of normative influences (Scott, 2008) indicates organizations will adopt standards they believe to be legitimate from other organizations. By adopting similar structures, standards eventually define what is necessary to be included in a classification. For example, to be considered a research university, certain research funding must be secured, but to succeed, research universities will have structures in place through sponsored research offices to assist with proposals, contracts, and management. In the case of the IHEs in the study, small private liberal arts institutions often share a governance structure which provides authority, but also work to the faculty (Geiger, 2016; Hirt, 2006). Two of the IHEs raise the concern of this work, thereby exhibiting efforts to counter normative pressures of how governance is structured in this type of IHE.

Reed College addresses these concerns in their section to support innovation in curricular planning and design:

Most importantly, our governance structures struggle to address issues, make desired changes, and seize new opportunities. (Some of these issues have been taken up previously by an Ad Hoc Committee on Faculty Governance. Everyone praises the service of generations of faculty serving on the two principal faculty governance committees, CAPP and CAT. These committees have taken on challenging faculty governance issues successfully, bringing recommendations to the faculty floor for discussion, making changes based on those discussions, and having final

recommendations passed. It is also the case that recommendations from these committees on the most longstanding issues, particularly those regarding faculty workload and course enrollments, often face insurmountable scrutiny. In this atmosphere, the committees' understandable desire is to move forward with change only when consensus is achieved. Relatedly, the college has less well-developed roles and responsibilities for department and division chairs, positions that at other institutions make many of the decisions that now roll up to either CAT or CAPP, further slowing the work of these two committees. (2022, p. 8)

In the quote above, the IHE illustrates both a struggle with normative structures through the work of their committees, and also refers to the work of other institutions in relation to faculty authority, which aligns more with mimetic forces. It is notable that the IHE included this concern in its public strategic plan as it references internal struggles with divisions of authority at a college.

Williams College raises similar concerns about decision-making at their college, but presents the both the challenges and benefits of the standard approach

In practice, though, decision-making at Williams involves a more diverse and complex ecosystem of standing committees, advisory groups and representative bodies. Colleges like ours are highly consultative places, to say the least. That consultation can at times be cumbersome, as was noted in our 2018 accreditation report. Innovation is hard when you have to ask everyone's opinion. But we value that quality of consultation for the participatory character it lends to our culture. Inclusion and efficiency both have value and must be balanced. (2021, p. 26).

By referencing their accreditation report, Williams is referencing the normative influences and structures in place to assure the legitimacy and stability of its organization.

The willingness to share challenges faced by small IHEs is notable during a time when many small colleges seemingly close without warning or to the surprise of constituents (Smetanka, 2024). Dr. Smetanka (2024), interim president of an institution that closed in 2024, calls for greater transparency by small college leaders as to the challenges these institutions face to maintain operations and education.

Recommendations for Future Practice

It is important to note that the IHE cohort was determined based upon one year's fall enrollment (2021). Future research should follow up to determine if the institutions studied faced enrollment difficulties or gained stability in their enrollment. While evaluating the strategic plans and details about each institution, the researcher identified the following areas of interest for future study.

External Community

The majority of the plans referenced their local communities as important to the IHEs. To better understand the role community and local plays in innovation, it would be valuable to conduct further study through qualitative case studies. Many of the plans utilize their community for applied learning opportunities and internships and do so in a mutually beneficial manner. However, some IHEs are also building upon the strengths and needs of the community as they are responsive to workforce demands. Two institutions, Occidental College and Rhodes College reference their cities as a strength and a reason to attend their institutions. Further research on these two institutions and their connections and utilization of their regions would help explore the role of communities and small private IHEs.

The focus on community aligns with Scott's (2010, p.17) indication that an important component of understanding social change is, "detailed attention to existing institutional variety at the organization, sector field, or societal level." The strategic plans studied indicate many of the IHEs framed their innovation around institutional strengths that differentiated them from their peer institutions and the sector of higher education. For example, Rhodes College (2020) indicates, "Our location in a city is distinctive among liberal arts colleges, and our relationship with Memphis is transformative for us." However, Occidental College (2024) also understands the value its Los Angeles location brings, "Occidental College will be the principal destination for a distinctive urban liberal arts experience, one that engages the full potential of global Los Angeles at its doorstep." Both institutions understand the importance of location and that their cities set them apart from peers and they build upon that strength through partnerships and applied learning opportunities for students in their communities (Occidental College, 2023; Rhodes College, 2020).

Distinctive Academic Programs

One solution to enrollment problems is to develop distinctive academic programs that will appeal to students (Biemiller, 2018). In depth review of the curriculums of the 10 institutions would provide valuable insight into the models used. Academic programs were connected to the key words at most of the institutions in the study and a few mentioned the necessity of and their support for funded applied learning opportunities such as internships. However, there are distinctive curricular programs that are unique to institutions for example Agnes Scott's SUMMIT program (Agnes Scott College, 2021; Biemiller, 2018) or Cornell College's Ingenuity curriculum and block plan with all courses taught over 18 days (Cornell College, 2023) that could be studied.

Rhodes exhibits an awareness of external factors, another noted component of social change within organizations (Scott, 2010, p.17) develop academic programs such as a graduate program in Urban Education and certificate program in health equity that build upon their academic approach, organizational values, and setting in order to become national leaders in those fields (Rhodes College, 2020). Occidental College (2024) indicates, “Oxy’s music major, with its innovative music production emphasis has been recognized as one of the best programs in the world.”

Recommendations for Peer Institutions

Research on the strategic plans of small private liberal arts institutions that had some enrollment success during a turbulent enrollment year illustrates the innovative, entrepreneurial, and transformational priorities of the institution offer insights into their public priorities related to innovation. In institutional research, one of the manners in which organizations respond to difficulties or opportunities is to model behavior after others that have navigated the same challenges, mimetic isomorphism. For example, IHEs might engage in a review of best practices in the field prior designing a new curriculum or implementing a student success initiative. The numerous consultants specializing in higher education exemplify the concept of mimetic isomorphism as consultants bring to an IHE knowledge gained from other work with institutions.

The results of the research can be informative to other institutions when determining their priorities whether in formalized strategic plans or campus initiatives. The research uncovered innovation was connected to students, with a focus on student learning and post-graduate success; curriculum; teaching and pedagogy. Artifact III includes a white paper to serve as guidance for small institutions to adopt best practices from peer institutions.

CONCLUSION OF ARTIFACT II

The volatile challenges of higher education, while experienced across institutional type, are illustrated by the number of closures of small private institutions in the United States. However, during these turbulent times, there is hope and success at some institutions of this category. In an effort to understand whether or not those institutions had innovation as a strategic priority, their plans were studied. As a result, the institutional foci of student learning, with a focus on future work, academic curriculum, teaching and pedagogy, and transparency related to challenges were found in the strategic plans studied. This qualitative research provided insight into the priorities of institutions of higher education that are small in size, privately held, and have a balanced curriculum of liberal arts and professions.

ARTIFACT III: IMPLEMENTATION IN PRACTICE

Introduction

The strategic priorities of small, private, liberal arts institutions are investigated in Artifact I which outlines the problem of practice through a review of literature, approaches to solving the problem, and theoretical approach to the research. The research findings are shared in Artifact II which includes the research approach and implementation, analytical strategy, and findings as interpreted through the lens of institutional theory (Scott, 2005, 2008). The research study concludes with this final Artifact III, a white paper detailing how a cohort of small private liberal arts IHEs prioritize innovation in their published strategic plans.

Audience

The white paper is intended to provide information and recommendations for higher education leaders of private institutions. The results will be informative to other institutions when determining their priorities whether in formalized strategic plans or campus initiatives. Much of the conversation and public attention related to small private institutions is related to their challenges and closures.

White Paper

Small Colleges and Innovation

Introduction of White Paper

The modern period of higher education will be remembered as a time of challenge and change. Transformation and reinvention as a global pandemic changed the model of education delivery in the United States. Ideally all of this change will be beneficial for students learning in institutions of higher education (IHE). Research on the strategic plans of small private liberal arts institutions that had some enrollment success during a turbulent enrollment year illustrates their

innovative, entrepreneurial, and transformational priorities which offer insights into their public priorities. The results of the research can be informative to other institutions when determining their priorities whether in formalized strategic plans or campus initiatives. The research uncovered innovation is connected to students, with a focus on student learning and post-graduate success; curriculum; teaching and pedagogy. This white paper will serve as guidance for small institutions seeking to learn more from their peers.

Why Focus on Innovation?

Innovation is offered as the solution for higher education's declining enrollment and financial challenges (Biemiller, 2019; Eide, 2018; Marcus, 2018; Mintz, 2021; Pulsipher & Stowers, 2021; Wingard, 2022; Zhao & Watterston, 2021) and has been a salvation for some colleges that have been on the brink of extinction. Sweet Briar College, slated for closure in 2015, has transformed into an innovator, being named as one of the nation's Most Innovative Schools by the 2021 rankings published by *U.S. News & World Report* (Poleski, 2020). The examples of schools such as Sweet Briar are heralded as proof that colleges must change to survive. During these challenging times, other small colleges have managed to stabilize their enrollment and, in some cases, grow their student population whether by adding new graduate programs or enhancing the undergraduate population. The colleges that have made substantial comebacks each have unique characteristics, geography, and missions that helped create the difficulties and overcome them as well.

Small Colleges and Innovation

In an effort to better understand what small institutions indicate about innovation in their strategic priorities, a qualitative content analysis study was conducted. The researcher considered institutions that have fiscal stability and have maintained enrollment from 2017-2022.

Institutions in the Study

Institutions met the following criteria:

- Private non-profit institution;
- Total enrollment between 1,000 to 2,500 students
- Highest degree offered: master's degree;
- Carnegie Classification 2021 Baccalaureate Colleges: Arts & Sciences focus;
- Fall 2021 enrollment reported through the Integrated Postsecondary Education System (IPEDS) met both of the following conditions
 - Equal to or greater than its five-year average for fall enrollment
 - Equal to or greater than its Fall 2020 enrollment;
- Fiscally responsible based upon five years of federal financial composite scores
 - All five years of composite scores were at or above the federal definition for stability, 1.5;
- Post a publicly available strategic plan on their website or social media.

For a list of institutions included in the study, please see Appendix A.

Strategic Plans of Small Private Liberal Arts Colleges

Once identified, the strategic plans were analyzed to determine the frequency of the use of innovation, entrepreneurship, transformation, or related words in the plans. The researcher reviewed each occurrence of the word or phrases and analyzed its paragraph or document structure to determine themes related to the phrase. The researcher established the primary codes as students with a focus on student learning and career readiness; academic programs and curriculum, and faculty teaching and pedagogy. The research study was inspired by an analysis

of strategic plans of universities that utilized content analysis and quantitative methods to illustrate what institutions indicate about innovation (Hall & Lulich, 2021).

Key Findings

- Student learning that includes applied learning opportunities for all students will help them build their work experiences and prepare them for a seamless transition to their careers
- Career focused curriculum serves a dual purpose of preparing students for professions and meeting the workforce needs of industry.
- Location matters. Institutions are utilizing their unique setting to provide learning experiences and enhance their communities.
- Honesty related to challenges, both internally within their communities and with the external world is important. Many of the institutions were transparent about difficulties they faced which can help build trust, enhance community, and provides an opportunity to implement innovation and change.

Responding to Workforce Needs

The American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) has commissioned national surveys on the effectiveness of higher education in preparing students for the workforce from the perspective of employers and has been disseminating their findings since 2006 (American Association of Colleges and Universities, 2024c; Finley, 2021, 2023; Finley et. al, 2021). The research provides insights into the degree to which higher education curriculum aligns with workforce needs including the knowledge and skills employees need for their careers (Finley, 2023). While the majority of the employers indicate students are prepared for their first jobs and future advancement, they find new hires lacking in specific skills areas including oral

communications. AAC&U and other higher education organizations have called for institutions to respond to the workforce needs and employers' expectations and requirements. Although it is not possible to determine if the institutions in this research study were influenced by these reports, their strategic plans illustrate a focus on providing curriculum and educational experiences that will prepare students for future success in their careers through the liberal arts.

Student Learning

As IHEs highlighted innovation in their strategic plans, student learning was the primary focus with a strong emphasis on assisting with their career readiness and learning. There is a clear unifying theme throughout the plans that the IHEs focus is not just enrolling and graduating students, but helping them to find work, including in sought after areas by job seekers and employers. Traditionally, liberal arts institutions have focused more on the theories and skills students will develop than future careers, however it is apparent that at these IHEs, they have adopted a focus not only on career, but jobs. In fact, references to future work and in some cases, workforce needs appear in eight strategic plans. For example, Mount Holyoke College (2020) intends to, "Develop or enrich academic programs in areas of strength or need, such as film and media studies, environmental studies, entrepreneurship and international business, global health, data and computer sciences, gender studies, and ethnic studies."

For the past few decades, research has highlighted the educational, individual, and societal benefits of high impact practices in higher education (Guo-Brennan, 2022; Kuh, 2008; Kuh, 2013; Lanning & Brown, 2019; Rush & Landgraf, 2023; Wismath & Newberry, 2019). The IHEs studied reference applied learning pedagogy most often and it is often connected to career readiness and experiences in the community. The IHEs refer to high-impact practices that provide opportunities to put theory into practice. For example, Williams College (2021)

indicates, “Williams needs to grow and expand these opportunities, ensuring that every student gains crucial experience in research, tutorials, engaged learning, study away, entrepreneurship or other modes of ‘learning by doing.’ In order to do this work well, the college will support efforts to enhance and expand our existing collaborations among faculty and student facing offices, including the Center for Learning in Action (CLiA), the Fellowships Office, Study Away, the ’68 Center for Career Exploration, the Zilkha Center and the Davis Center.”

There is a recognition not only of the importance of students gaining real world experience, but the importance of ensuring all students are able to participate, not just those that can afford to take unpaid internships through programs to pay for the internships or provide a stipend (Guo-Brennan, 2022; Kuh, 2013; Rush & Landgraf, 2023). For example, Reed College (2022) pledges to, “COMMIT funding and staffing support so that at least two-thirds of the student body have a significant workplace experience during their years at Reed, including a paid or unpaid internship (Reed stipend), fellowship, research, or artistic, socially, or commercially viable entrepreneurial project.”

Career-Focused Curriculum

Liberal arts institutions in this category (balanced) have a less traditional approach to the liberal arts by including professional programs such as teaching and nursing. AAC&U research on what employers are seeking was helpful guidance for institutions seeking out research on how to align their curriculum to employers’ needs and assist with workforce demands. Faculty help prepare students for future careers through the infusion of applied learning into their curriculum offerings. Faculty innovation in the classroom enhances student learning, especially if curricular innovations include current opportunities such as AI.

Williams College (2021) articulates the alignment between the liberal arts and career, aligned in their initiative to, “Invest in supporting students’ career preparation through interviewing, networking, resume building and exploration, including entrepreneurial opportunities that reflect the creative and translational spirit of a liberal arts education.” Through their initiative, Williams is focusing on the employability of liberal arts graduates through their curriculum that includes applied learning, internships, and programming with their communities.

Community Connections

The majority of the plans referenced their local communities as important to the IHEs. Many of the plans utilize their community for applied learning opportunities and internships and do so in a mutually beneficial manner. However, some IHEs are also building upon the strengths and needs of the community as they are responsive to workforce demands.

The strategic plans studied indicate many of the IHEs framed their innovation around institutional strengths that differentiated them from their peer institutions and the sector of higher education. For example, Rhodes College (2020) indicates, “Our location in a city is distinctive among liberal arts colleges, and our relationship with Memphis is transformative for us.” However, Occidental College (2024) also understands the value its Los Angeles location brings, “Occidental College will be the principal destination for a distinctive urban liberal arts experience, one that engages the full potential of global Los Angeles at its doorstep.” Both institutions understand the importance of location and that their cities set them apart from peers and they build upon that strength through partnerships and applied learning opportunities for students in their communities (Occidental College, 2023; Rhodes College, 2020).

Location is more than a beautiful setting and great weather, Mount Holyoke (2022) plans include, “Create innovative learning spaces and adopt new technologies to facilitate global/local

engagement and create more intentional opportunities to collaborate both on and off campus and around the world.” Institutions in the study connected with their communities on multiple levels including as a resource for work opportunities, partner in projects, collaborator to solve problems. However, Occidental College (2024) also understands the value its Los Angeles location brings, “Occidental College will be the principal destination for a distinctive urban liberal arts experience, one that engages the full potential of global Los Angeles at its doorstep.” Both institutions understand the importance of location and that their cities set them apart from peers and they build upon that strength through partnerships and applied learning opportunities for students in their communities (Occidental College, 2023; Rhodes College, 2020).

Transparency Builds Trust and Opportunity

The willingness to share challenges faced by small IHEs is notable during a time when many small colleges seemingly close without warning or to the surprise of constituents (Smetanka, 2024). Dr. Smetanka (2024), interim president of an institution that closed in 2024, calls for greater transparency by college leaders as to the challenges these institutions face to maintain operations and education. Smetanka (2024) indicates, “Besides the high ideals of mission integrity and commitment to truth-finding and truth-telling, the pragmatic reason for this necessary discussion is to limit the pain if an institution must close and to welcome more voices earlier to face the challenges collectively.” Five of the institutions in the study referenced challenges or difficulties they are facing; these references are notable in this study which focuses on innovation, entrepreneurship, and transformation.

The internal challenges mentioned by the strategic plans studied include recruitment and retention; dependency on tuition revenue; the high cost of delivering quality education; academic calendar difficulties; barriers for historically marginalized communities, the high costs of

technology; and structural challenges of a shared governance system and the need for rapid decision-making (Brand, 2021; Occidental College, 2023; Reed College, 2022; Rhodes College, 2020; Williams College, 2021).

The IHEs studied illustrate the awareness of community demographics and national trends in higher education as they reflect on external difficulties for their work including racism and the need for equality and justice; strong competition for students and faculty; the public's lack of understanding of the value of the liberal arts; post-pandemic challenges; national economy, climate change, and the public's resistance to knowledge/expertise (Brand, 2021; Occidental College, 2023; Reed College, 2022; Rhodes College, 2020; Williams College, 2021).

Conclusion of White Paper

The traditional liberal arts college has been less focused on careers or jobs than other sectors of higher education, but modern institutions are aligning their liberal arts curriculum with expressed needs for current and future workforce. Through the exploration of campus priorities of peer institutions, colleges and universities seeking this type of transformation can gain insights into how (well) the curricular changes serve the needs of students and employers. This white paper is offered as a resource to those seeking innovation and change.

Dissemination Plan

In addition to the white paper included in Appendix E, the researcher intends to submit a proposal to the 2025 annual meeting of the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U). AAC&U is an international membership organization primarily for institutions of higher education with a mission to advance “the democratic purposes of higher education by promoting equity, innovation, and excellence in liberal education (Association of American Colleges & Universities, 2024a). The study fits with AAC&U research including recent reports

on faculty integrating career readiness into curriculum and national surveys of employers perspectives of higher education (American Association of Colleges and Universities, 2024b). Please see Appendix D for the proposal requirements to be completed. The researcher is a past presenter at the annual conference. In addition, the researcher will submit an article for publication to *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning*.

CONCLUSION OF ARTIFACT III

Through the exploration of campus priorities of peer institutions, colleges and universities seeking this type of transformation can gain insights into how (well) the curricular changes serve the needs of students and employers. This white paper is offered as a resource to those seeking innovation and change. In addition, the researcher will submit a proposal to present the findings of the study at the 2025 American Association of Colleges and University's annual meeting for the advancing public purpose track which will explore the public purposes of higher education and how colleges and universities can advance them by focusing on the intersection of students' career preparation; civic, community, and global engagement; and holistic well-being.

CONCLUSION

In the beginning of the project, the researcher sought to explore the challenges and opportunities faced by small, private liberal arts institutions of higher education due in part to the many education headlines regarding the closure of such institutions. The dire circumstances forcing the closures of IHEs with strong missions, talented faculty, and eager students are complex and individualized to each institution. However, there are also institutions in the sector that are maintaining or increasing their enrollment and providing robust education to serve students and society. Through the exploration of the problem in Artifact I, the study and findings in Artifact II, and the sharing of findings in the white paper in Artifact III, the research has added to the knowledge and conversation around opportunities for this sector of higher education and provided guidance for leaders in these fields. Though modest in scope, the research provides insights into how 8 institutions are navigating turbulent times in higher education. In addition, the researcher will submit a proposal to present findings from the study at the 2025 American Association of Colleges and Universities annual meeting and submit an article for publication to *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning*.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

ID	Institution	Fall 2021 Total Enrollment
138600	Agnes Scott College	1109
210571	Albright College	1465
168786	Aquinas College	1362
143084	Augustana College	2367
222983	Austin College	1228
132602	Bethune-Cookman University	2624
183822	Bloomfield College	1300
231581	Bridgewater College	1463
211291	Bucknell University	3757
217873	Claflin University	1866
112260	Claremont McKenna College	1422
190099	Colgate University	3176
126678	Colorado College	2266
173300	Concordia College at Moorhead	1919
153162	Cornell College	1055
212009	Dickinson College	2186
165671	Emmanuel College	1950
218070	Furman University	2463
156745	Georgetown College	1625
165936	Gordon College	1804
162654	Goucher College	1917
198613	Guilford College	1198
191533	Hartwick College	1170
107080	Hendrix College	1120
191630	Hobart William Smith Colleges	1684
145691	Illinois College	1097
198756	Johnson C Smith University	1166
213251	Juniata College	1293
146481	Lake Forest College	1690
209065	Linfield University	1297
198950	Meredith College	1711
166939	Mount Holyoke College	2342
214175	Muhlenberg College	2095

101912	Oakwood University	1452
204501	Oberlin College	2953
120254	Occidental College	1964
107512	Ouachita Baptist University	1764
209922	Reed College	1566
221351	Rhodes College	2073
183239	Saint Anselm College	1977
174792	Saint Johns University	1643
231059	Saint Michael's College	1573
239716	Saint Norbert College	2009
195304	Sarah Lawrence College	1766
195216	St Lawrence University	2279
167996	Stonehill College	2479
216278	Susquehanna University	2202
130590	Trinity College	2190
229267	Trinity University	2704
197133	Vassar College	2516
234173	Virginia Wesleyan University	1324
154527	Wartburg College	1541
216667	Washington & Jefferson College	1157
216807	Westminster College	1225
125763	Whittier College	1387
168342	Williams College	2224
206525	Wittenberg University	1326
141361	Young Harris College	1407

Appendix B

Table 1 IHEs meeting two enrollment criteria.

Institution Name	Fall 2021	Fall 2020	Fall 2019	Fall 2018	Fall 2017	Difference (2021- 2020)	Five-year average	Difference (2021 - Five-year average)
Agnes Scott College	1,109	1,080	1,067	1,030	921	29	1,041	68
Claremont McKenna College	1,422	1,264	1,346	1,327	1,345	158	1,341	81
Colorado College	2,266	2,050	2,123	2,144	2,118	216	2,140	126
Cornell College	1,055	1,002	1,020	1,028	1,009	53	1,023	32
Georgetown College	1,625	1,565	1,484	1,608	1,767	60	1,610	15
Lake Forest College	1,690	1,583	1,562	1,512	1,542	107	1,578	112
Mount Holyoke College	2,342	2,040	2,300	2,335	2,334	302	2,270	72
Occidental College	1,964	1,839	1,985	1,930	1,972	125	1,938	26
Ouachita Baptist University	1,764	1,704	1,633	1,660	1,545	60	1,661	103
Reed College	1,566	1,385	1,471	1,503	1,470	181	1,479	87
Rhodes College	2,073	1,875	2,010	2,036	2,010	198	2,001	72
Sarah Lawrence College	1,766	1,506	1,670	1,709	1,696	260	1,669	97
Williams College	2,224	1,987	2,150	2,149	2,134	237	2,129	95

Table 2 IHEs meeting one enrollment criteria.

Institution Name	Fall 2021	Fall 2020	Fall 2019	Fall 2018	Fall 2017	Difference (2021- 2020)	Five-year average	Difference (2021 - Five-year average)
ONLY have FY 21 greater than FY 20; not greater than 5 year average								
Dickinson College	2,186	1,932	2,133	2,399	2,382	254	2,206	-20
Emmanuel College	1,950	1,946	2,222	2,209	2,083	4	2,082	-132
Hendrix College	1,120	1,076	1,121	1,208	1,249	44	1,155	-35
Muhlenberg College	2,095	2,067	2,251	2,340	2,367	28	2,224	-129
Oakwood University	1,452	1,414	1,526	1,636	1,711	38	1,548	-96
Saint Norbert College	2,009	1,939	2,081	2,228	2,165	70	2,084	-75
ONLY have FY 21 greaterhan 5 year average; not greater than FY 20								
Illinois College	1,097	1,154	1,057	983	959	-57	1,050	47
Wartburg College	1,541	1,563	1,505	1,498	1,529	-22	1,527	14
Young Harris College	1,407	1,417	1,415	1,425	1,202	-10	1,373	34

Table 3 IHES meeting none of the enrollment criteria.

Institution Name	Fall 2021	Fall 2020	Fall 2019	Fall 2018	Fall 2017	Difference (2021- 2020)	Five-year average	Difference (2021 - Five-year average)
Albright College	1,465	1,584	1,758	1,934	2,036	-119	1,755	-290
Aquinas College	1,362	1,517	1,600	1,758	1,716	-155	1,591	-229
Augustana College	2,367	2,389	2,546	2,543	2,647	-22	2,498	-131
Austin College	1,228	1,302	1,299	1,296	1,228	-74	1,271	-43
Bloomfield College	1,300	1,533	1,628	1,685	1,842	-233	1,598	-298
Bridgewater College	1,463	1,597	1,754	1,857	1,889	-134	1,712	-249
Claflin University	1,866	2,048	2,070	2,172	2,129	-182	2,057	-191
Concordia College at Moorhead	1,919	1,973	2,042	2,129	2,059	-54	2,024	-105
Furman University	2,463	2,567	2,828	2,947	2,949	-104	2,751	-288
Gordon College	1,804	1,816	1,857	1,955	1,963	-12	1,879	-75
Goucher College	1,917	2,015	2,168	2,267	2,236	-98	2,121	-204
Guilford College	1,198	1,429	1,536	1,576	1,680	-231	1,484	-286
Hartwick College	1,170	1,209	1,193	1,176	1,201	-39	1,190	-20
Hobart William Smith Colleges	1,684	1,833	2,070	2,241	2,244	-149	2,014	-330
Johnson C Smith University	1,166	1,306	1,494	1,565	1,483	-140	1,403	-237
Juniata College	1,293	1,356	1,429	1,433	1,495	-63	1,401	-108
Linfield University	1,297	1,392	1,414	1,376	1,535	-95	1,403	-106
Meredith College	1,711	1,802	1,810	1,905	1,980	-91	1,842	-131
Saint Anselm College	1,977	2,019	2,033	2,024	1,964	-42	2,003	-26
Saint Johns University	1,643	1,668	1,727	1,777	1,815	-25	1,726	-83
Saint Michael's College	1,573	1,724	1,875	1,950	2,077	-151	1,840	-267
St Lawrence University	2,279	2,319	2,434	2,522	2,493	-40	2,409	-130
Stonehill College	2,479	2,504	2,500	2,514	2,498	-25	2,499	-20
Susquehanna University	2,202	2,241	2,315	2,396	2,349	-39	2,301	-99
Trinity College	2,190	2,241	2,234	2,235	2,282	-51	2,236	-46
Virginia Wesleyan University	1,324	1,347	1,487	1,437	1,470	-23	1,413	-89
Washington & Jefferson College	1,157	1,167	1,265	1,357	1,412	-10	1,272	-115
Westminster College	1,225	1,228	1,231	1,269	1,263	-3	1,243	-18
Whittier College	1,387	1,564	1,841	1,852	1,987	-177	1,726	-339
Wittenberg University	1,326	1,488	1,619	1,801	1,884	-162	1,624	-298

Appendix C

Codebook

Document Analysis of Strategic Plans

Jillain Veil-Ehnert

Code System

1 Specific disciplines	0
1.1 Music	2
1.2 Arts	6
2 Academic	22
3 Alumni	2
4 Assessment and evaluation	3
5 Centers	0
5.1 Center for Teaching	1
5.2 Center for community partnerships	1
5.3 Centers for interdisciplinary	1
6 Co-Curricular	2
7 Collaboration	7
8 Curricular (+) (+)	15
8.1 college to career pathways	1
8.2 interdisciplinary curriculum	2
8.3 Graduate programs	2
8.4 immersive curriculum	2
9 Data driven goals	1
10 Difficulties, challenges, obstacles, reality of higher ed	9
11 Diversity	5
11.1 Open minded	1
11.2 inclusive	1

12 Enrollment (recruit and retain)	9
13 ENTREPRENEUR (+)	0
13.1 Entrepreneurial	3
13.2 Entrepreneurship	3
14 Ethical ideals	1
15 External community	26
16 External recognition	4
17 Facilities	2
17.1 Faculty and Student facing offices	1
18 Faculty	2
18.1 Interdisciplinary institute - faculty	0
18.2 Faculty advising	1
18.3 Faculty work life satisfaction	1
18.4 Industry experts as faculty	1
18.5 Faculty workload	2
18.6 Faculty service	1
18.7 Faculty scholarship	5
18.8 Faculty recruitment & Retention	1
18.9 Faculty professional development	2
18.10 Faculty course equivalency for participation model	1
18.11 Faculty compensation	1
18.12 Faculty teaching	9
18.13 Faculty incentive	2

18.14 Faculty Governance change	2
19 Financial (+) (+) (+) (+) (+)	7
19.1 Balanced budget	1
20 Global	7
21 INNOVATE	1
21.1 Innovations	1
21.2 Innovating	1
21.3 Innovation	13
21.4 Innovative	15
22 Institutional	8
22.1 College-wide	5
23 Mission	3
24 Operations	1
25 Pedagogy (+)	8
25.1 Applied learning	14
25.2 Community based learning	4
25.3 Immersive Student Learning	1
25.4 Project-based learning	1
25.5 Faculty - Student collaboration, mentoring	8
26 Policy	1
27 Religion	1
28 Research	8
29 Social sciences	1

30 Staff	2
31 Build on Strengths	20
32 Students (+)	0
32.1 Students living lives of purpose	3
32.2 student financial aid	1
32.3 student success achievement	7
32.4 Student demand	2
32.5 Student debt	1
32.6 student belonging	1
32.7 student adaptability	1
32.8 Students: Post graduation (+)	10
32.9 Student learning	13
33 Sustainability	4
34 Systems change	7
35 Technology	2
36 Traditional LA terminology	11
36.1 Big questions	1
36.2 intellectual	1
36.3 Theoretical	1
36.4 values	2
37 TRANSFORMATION	3
37.1 Transform	2
37.2 Transformational	2

37.3 Transformative	12
37.4 Transformed	1
37.5 Transforming	1
38 Workforce development	11

1 Specific disciplines

This code was created to merge different disciplines under one code. It was created as a parent code without having any codes in the documents themselves.

It is meant to categorize different disciplines that fall under specific codes: music and arts. It would have been used for other codes if they had been uncovered.

1.1 Specific disciplines >> Music

Music in being used as a field of study that is a strength of the institution.

It is an academic discipline or department

1.2 Specific disciplines >> Arts

Arts is used as a discipline but also sometimes directly connected to performing arts.

Arts - used as branches of creativity - performing arts, literature, music, dance

2 Academic

Referring to the academic components of higher education.

Academic definition related to education

3 Alumni

Graduates of the IHE.

This code is used when the IHE is referring to longer term out of college; or refers to a group of graduates who help donate time or money to the IHE.

It is different from post-graduate because that is more focused on immediate years or further studies. However, post-graduates are also alumni. Check the context related to the segment to determine if it is post-graduate or alumni.

4 Assessment and evaluation

Assessment is generally for individual learning and evaluation is for programming or evaluating an entity.

This code was used when the segment specifically mentioned one of the activities;

- Elevating high-impact educational practices as a distinctive feature for students

5 Centers

Centers is a parent code created without any segments in documents included. When I came upon centers, I coded them with the type of center so I wouldn't lose track of the type of centers that IHEs were referencing.

Centers do not necessarily need to be brick and mortar, they are the way in which actions or activities are completed in a concentrated space. Again, it might not be physical space

5.1 Centers >> Center for Teaching

Center for teaching - concentrate the work to enhance teaching

5.2 Centers >> Center for community partnerships

concentrating all the campus efforts for engaging with community

For this IHE it is a building that will facilitate community-engaged programming

5.3 Centers >> Centers for interdisciplinary

physical space to promote and enable collaborations across disciplines

6 Co-Curricular

co-curricular refers to organized activities that are not a part of the formal curriculum but offer learning opportunities.

These opportunities are outside a traditional classroom, probably not for a grade, but students are learning

7 Collaboration

Partnership - especially in relation to external community

8 Curricular (+) (+)

Curricular is used when pertaining to the formal curriculum. It is a parent code

5/18/2024 6:45 PM - ehnert

Merged with code across the curriculum

5/18/2024 6:51 PM - ehnert

Merged with code Curricular (+) > High Impact learning

8.1 Curricular (+) (+) >> college to career pathways

developing pathways - plans for how students will move into post-graduation success
ensuring students know how what they are learning now will help in future professions

8.2 Curricular (+) (+) >> interdisciplinary curriculum

curriculum - academics with more than one discipline

Rhodes - wants to establish interdisciplinary center

8.3 Curricular (+) (+) >> Graduate programs

post-baccalaureate academics

lit review indicates some institutions are trying to help gain revenue streams through addition of graduate programs

Code is used to note when they are mentioning graduate programs

8.4 Curricular (+) (+) >> immersive curriculum

9 Data driven goals

10 Difficulties, challenges, obstacles, reality of higher ed barriers faced by the institution; not the students

use code to indicate the IHE is referencing a problem, challenge, difficulty, obstacle whether internal or external

often used at the beginning to set up the need for the plan
Cornell is very open about financial challenges; Reed mentions structural issues and faculty issues - not quality, but lack of resources

11 Diversity

More than one approach/background; including all people

Depending upon usage, can be related to demographics or it can be related to ideas

11.1 Diversity >> Open minded

Used in relation to diversity -being open to new opportunities or people

11.2 Diversity >> inclusive

including all - ideas, people,

12 Enrollment (recruit and retain)

Enrollment is used for recruitment and retain as well.

Technically, it is related to admissions or being admitted and joining the IHE

However, in practice enrollment as a division of an IHE also includes external relations (sometimes) and marketing

13 ENTREPRENEUR (+)

Primary term

Entrepreneurship in the study applied to individuals and institutions, therefore both definitions are included here. For individuals, entrepreneurship must also be widely defined as more than an activity of the business school on campus. For this research, *entrepreneurship* was defined as,

“the self-directed pursuit of opportunities to create value for others” (Schoeniger et al., 2021, p. 4).

Entrepreneur was not found in any of the documents, but it is included as a primary code because it is a key code for the research.

5/20/2024 10:03 AM - ehnert
Merged with code ENTREPRENEUR > Entrepreneurs

13.1 ENTREPRENEUR (+) >> Entrepreneurial
derivative of entrepreneurship;

In addition, *entrepreneurial* higher education institutions were understood as ones that, “actively seeks to shift in organizational character so as to arrive at a more promising posture for the future” (Foss & Gibson, 2015, p. 2).

13.2 ENTREPRENEUR (+) >> Entrepreneurship
derivative of entrepreneur

For individuals, entrepreneurship must also be widely defined as more than an activity of the business school on campus. For this research, *entrepreneurship* was defined as, “the self-directed pursuit of opportunities to create value for others” (Schoeniger et al., 2021, p. 4).

14 Ethical ideals

15 External community
not belonging to the primary group

Use when IHEs are referencing the community beyond their own institution

16 External recognition
Outsiders/outside entities that acknowledge something positive about the IHE

often us news & world report

outside sources giving awards

17 Facilities
brick and mortar
used when discussing campus buildings/campus itself

17.1 Facilities >> Faculty and Student facing offices

18 Faculty
Those that teach in higher education

Mostly serves as a parent code;

- 18.1 Faculty >> Interdisciplinary institute - faculty
- 18.2 Faculty >> Faculty advising
- 18.3 Faculty >> Faculty work life satisfaction
- 18.4 Faculty >> Industry experts as faculty
- 18.5 Faculty >> Faculty workload
- 18.6 Faculty >> Faculty service
- 18.7 Faculty >> Faculty scholarship
- 18.8 Faculty >> Faculty recruitment & Retention
- 18.9 Faculty >> Faculty professional development
- 18.10 Faculty >> Faculty course equivalency for participation model
- 18.11 Faculty >> Faculty compensation

18.12 Faculty >> Faculty teaching
teaching - integrates curriculum (content taught) and pedagogy (how its taught)

applying the theory of pedagogy
educating students

- 18.13 Faculty >> Faculty incentive
- 18.14 Faculty >> Faculty Governance change

19 Financial (+) (+) (+) (+) (+)
Related to money; finances of the IHE

5/18/2024 6:50 PM - ehnert
Merged with code financial investment

5/18/2024 6:50 PM - ehnert
Merged with code financial strategies

5/18/2024 6:50 PM - ehnert
Merged with code Fundraising

5/18/2024 6:50 PM - ehnert
Merged with code Budgetary Impacts

5/18/2024 6:59 PM - ehnert
Merged with code New revenue streams

19.1 Financial (+) (+) (+) (+) (+) >> Balanced budget

20 Global
of the entire world

Global is used broadly and was noted for curriculum - international
also for impact

21 INNOVATE
Key term

Innovation was conceptualized as a thing or action that is new or novel resulting in something that is perceived to have value (Linton, 2018, p.7). This study used the understanding of innovation in higher education as, “the conception and application of new or novel ideas in evolving learning environments” (Barger et al., 2021, p. 97).

21.1 INNOVATE >> Innovations
derivative of innovation

Innovation was conceptualized as a thing or action that is new or novel resulting in something that is perceived to have value (Linton, 2018, p.7). This study used the understanding of innovation in higher education as, “the conception and application of new or novel ideas in evolving learning environments” (Barger et al., 2021, p. 97).

21.2 INNOVATE >> Innovating
derivative of innovation

21.3 INNOVATE >> Innovation
Variation of innovate

Innovation was conceptualized as a thing or action that is new or novel resulting in something that is perceived to have value (Linton, 2018, p.7). This study used the understanding of innovation in higher education as, “the conception and application of new or novel ideas in evolving learning environments” (Barger et al., 2021, p. 97).

21.4 INNOVATE >> Innovative
derivative of innovate

Innovation was conceptualized as a thing or action that is new or novel resulting in something that is perceived to have value (Linton, 2018, p.7). This study used the understanding of innovation in higher education as, “the conception and application of new or novel ideas in evolving learning environments” (Barger et al., 2021, p. 97).

22 Institutional
Related to the entire organization;

If it is related more to academics, it is often called campus-wide; or if it is related to students.

22.1 Institutional >> College-wide
throughout the organization; usually related not related to administration

23 Mission
primary activity or goal for the organization
vision
why they exist

24 Operations

25 Pedagogy (+)
5/18/2024 7:01 PM - ehert
Merged with code Remote learning

25.1 Pedagogy (+) >> Applied learning

25.2 Pedagogy (+) >> Community based learning
Learning with real-life situations or activities
usually in collaboration with community partners

Can be internships - but often is more involved

25.3 Pedagogy (+) >> Immersive Student Learning
learning by doing but also related to being totally involved in or surrounded by the learning

we have immersive language training - you are in a language village where only the foreign language is spoken

25.4 Pedagogy (+) >> Project-based learning
learning by working on a project - solving a problem;

form of applied learning

25.5 Pedagogy (+) >> Faculty - Student collaboration, mentoring
Connections between faculty and students - hallmark of a small college experience
26 Policy

27 Religion

28 Research
Research is used as an action; a high impact practice

one of the integrated learning activities

29 Social sciences

30 Staff

31 Build on Strengths

leveraging what the IHE is already good at

Used when the IHE is considering what they are already good at when looking to expand or innovate

32 Students (+)

Learners in IHE

Primary code for many other codes

5/20/2024 10:04 AM - ehnert

Merged with code Students > Student Health

32.1 Students (+) >> Students living lives of purpose
people doing something meaningful in their lives

This is what I consider tradition Liberal arts terminology; it is vague as to what the LA deliver, but is often used.

Probably goes back to beginnings of LA when only the wealthy could live lives of purpose

32.2 Students (+) >> student financial aid

32.3 Students (+) >> student success achievement
student accomplishments

this is used when they are general, not specific to graduate school or a post graduation route

32.4 Students (+) >> Student demand

32.5 Students (+) >> Student debt

32.6 Students (+) >> student belonging

32.7 Students (+) >> student adaptability

32.8 Students (+) >> Students: Post graduation (+)

usually means the immediate time after graduation and refers to the work, or education they will go to next

This is different from alumni;

5/18/2024 7:07 PM - ehnert

Merged with code Post-bacc partnerships with other IHE

32.9 Students (+) >> Student learning

process where learners acquire knowledge and skills

33 Sustainability

environment related

34 Systems change

Referring to structural or policy

35 Technology

36 Traditional LA terminology

36.1 Traditional LA terminology >> Big questions

36.2 Traditional LA terminology >> intellectual

36.3 Traditional LA terminology >> Theoretical

36.4 Traditional LA terminology >> values

37 TRANSFORMATION

Key term

37.1 TRANSFORMATION >> Transform

to change;

begin as one thing; end as another

derivative of transformation

37.2 TRANSFORMATION >> Transformational

derivative of transformation

having the aspect or causing change

37.3 TRANSFORMATION >> Transformative

derivative of transformation

having qualities that will change something

37.4 TRANSFORMATION >> Transformed

derivative of transformation

past tense of transform; changed

37.5 TRANSFORMATION >> Transforming

derivative of transform

actively changing

38 Workforce development

Preparing students to be productive workers; in the workforce

This code is used when it refers to future professions or jobs specifically rather than general post-graduation success.

It is also used when more traditional ideas on workforce development are mentioned - such as meeting the needs of industry

An Example of a code summary:

Challenges and Difficulties

Code Summary

Difficulties, challenges, obstacles, reality of higher ed 

[Difficulties, challenges, obstacles, reality of higher ed](#)

barriers faced by the institution; not the students

use code to indicate the IHE is referencing a problem, challenge, difficulty, obstacle whether internal or external

often used at the beginning to set up the need for the plan

Cornell is very open about financial challenges; Reed mentions structural issues and faculty issues - not quality, but lack of resources

1.

"The purpose of our three-year plan is to create innovative and differentiating curricular and co-curricular opportunities and operational excellence approaches necessary for Cornell to be financially and operationally sustainable for the long-term. Areas of immediate emphasis are:
Balanced annual operating budgets
Annual recruitment goals
Annual retention goals
An organizational structure and employee roles/responsibilities that are aligned with our strategic priorities"

Comments: The IHE mentions balanced budgets and enrollment as immediate emphasis

Code: • [Difficulties, challenges, obstacles, reality of higher ed](#)

Cornell College, 1 - 1

ehnert, 3/16/2024 2:41 PM, 

Code: [Difficulties, challenges, obstacles, reality of higher ed](#)

Adjective; paired with differentiating; related to curricular and non-curricular offerings.

Introductory section of plan; PURPOSE of entire strategic plan; justification of need references difficulties.

Appendix D

Call for Proposals for 2025 Annual Meeting for AAC&U

An application will be submitted to the following track:

Advancing Public Purposes

This track will explore the public purposes of higher education and how colleges and universities can advance them by focusing on the intersection of students' career preparation; civic, community, and global engagement; and holistic well-being.

Proposal Abstract (Max 400 words)

The abstract should describe the content and significance of the session and its format and how the audience will be engaged. Be sure to include new information, examples of innovation, and proven results. Please format your abstract into the following sections:

Anticipated learning outcomes for participants (Max 200 words)

Include up to four learning outcomes

Background and evidence of the effectiveness of the work being presented (Max 250 words)

Please elaborate on the background and evidence of the work being presented. If your proposal pertains to a project, program, course, or other feature for which there is material on the Web, please provide the URL here.

Plan for Participant Interaction (Max 250 words)

For discussion, panel, and roundtable sessions, please provide the guiding questions for the discussion portion of your proposed session or specify how you would facilitate interaction and engagement during the proposed session.

Brief Description (Max 150 words)

Provide a short description to be used in promotional materials and in both the meeting program and the mobile app. Please remember that—should your proposal be accepted—a participant's decision to attend your session will be based, in large part, on this description. It should be accurate and as compelling as possible.

Expected Learning Outcomes (Max 75 words)

Describe or list the outcomes with which you hope the audience members will leave the session (i.e., the "takeaways").

Session Takeaways (Max 75 words)

Describe specific examples that attendees would take away from this session and apply or use at their institutions.

Small Colleges and Innovation

**By: Jillain Veil-Ehnert
University of North Dakota**

Introduction

The modern period of higher education will be remembered as a time of challenge and change. Transformation and reinvention as a global pandemic changed the model of education delivery in the United States. Ideally all of this change will be beneficial for students learning in institutions of higher education (IHE). Research on the strategic plans of small private liberal arts institutions that had some enrollment success during a turbulent enrollment year illustrates their innovative, entrepreneurial, and transformational priorities which offer insights into their public priorities. The results of the research can be informative to other institutions when determining their priorities whether in formalized strategic plans or campus initiatives. The research uncovered innovation is connected to students, with a focus on student learning and post-graduate success; curriculum; teaching and pedagogy. This white paper will serve as guidance for small institutions seeking to learn more from their peers.

Why focus on innovation?

Innovation is offered as the solution for higher education's declining enrollment and financial challenges (Eide, 2018; Marcus, 2018; Mintz, 2021; Pulsipher & Stowers, 2021; Wingard, 2022; Zhao & Watterston, 2021) and has been a salvation for some colleges that have been on the brink of extinction. Sweet Briar College, slated for closure in 2015, has transformed into an innovator, being named as one of the nation's Most Innovative Schools by the 2021 rankings published by *U.S. News & World Report* (Poleski, 2020). The examples of schools such as Sweet Briar are heralded as proof that colleges must change to survive.

During these challenging times, other small colleges have managed to stabilize their enrollment and, in some cases, grow their student population whether by adding new graduate programs or enhancing the undergraduate population. The colleges that have made substantial comebacks each have unique characteristics, geography, and missions that helped create the difficulties and overcome them as well.

Strategic Plans of Small Private Liberal Arts Colleges

In an effort to better understand what small institutions indicate about innovation in their strategic priorities, a qualitative content analysis study was conducted on the strategic plans of small private liberal arts institutions. The researcher considered institutions that had fiscal stability and maintained enrollment for the period of 2017-2021.

Institutions in the Study

- Private non-profit institution;
- Total enrollment between 1,000 to 2,500 students
- Highest degree offered: master's degree;
- Carnegie Classification 2021 Baccalaureate Colleges: Arts & Sciences focus;
- Fall 2021 enrollment reported through the Integrated Postsecondary Education System (IPEDS) met both of the following conditions: Equal to or greater than its five-year average for fall enrollment and equal to or greater than its Fall 2020 enrollment;
- Fiscally responsible based upon five years of federal financial composite scores, all five years of composite scores were at or above the federal definition for stability, 1.5;
- Post a publicly available strategic plan on their website or social media.

For a list of institutions included in the study, please see Appendix A.

Strategic Plans of Small Private Liberal Arts Colleges

Once identified, the strategic plans were analyzed to determine the frequency of the use of innovation, entrepreneurship, transformation, or related words in the plans. The researcher reviewed each occurrence of the word or phrases and analyzed its paragraph or document structure to determine themes related to the phrase. The researcher established the primary codes as students with a focus on student learning and career readiness; academic programs and curriculum, and faculty teaching and pedagogy. The research study was inspired by an analysis of strategic plans of universities that utilized content analysis and quantitative methods to illustrate what institutions indicate about innovation (Hall & Lulich, 2021).

Key Findings

- Student learning that includes applied learning opportunities for all students will help them build their work experiences and prepare them for a seamless transition to their careers Career focused
- curriculum serves a dual purpose of preparing students for professions and meeting the workforce needs of industry.
- Location matters. Institutions are utilizing their unique setting to provide learning experiences and enhance their communities.
- Honesty related to challenges, both internally within their communities and with the external world is important. Many of the institutions were transparent about difficulties they faced which can help build trust, enhance community, and provides an opportunity to implement innovation and change.

Responding to Workforce Needs

The American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) has commissioned national surveys on the effectiveness of higher education in preparing students for the workforce from the perspective of employers and has been disseminating their findings since 2006 (American Association of Colleges and Universities, 2024; Finley, 2021, 2023; Finley et. al, 2021). The research provides insights into the degree to which higher education curriculum aligns with workforce needs including the knowledge and skills employees need for their careers (Finley, 2023).

While the majority of the employers indicate students are prepared for their first jobs and future advancement, they find new hires lacking in specific skills areas including oral communications. AAC&U and other higher education organizations have called for institutions to respond to the workforce needs and employers' expectations and requirements. Although it is not possible to determine if the institutions in this research study were influenced by these reports, their strategic plans illustrate a focus on providing curriculum and educational experiences that will prepare students for future success in their careers through the liberal arts.

Student Learning and High Impact Practices

As IHEs highlighted innovation in their strategic plans, student learning was the primary focus with a strong emphasis on assisting with their career readiness and high impact practices such as applied learning. Traditionally, liberal arts institutions have focused more on the theories and skills students will develop than future careers, however it is apparent that at these IHEs, they have adopted a focus not only on career, but jobs. In fact, references to future work and in some cases workforce needs appear in eight strategic plans. For example, Mount Holyoke College (2020) intends to, “Develop or enrich academic programs in areas of strength or need, such as film and media studies, environmental studies, entrepreneurship and international business, global health, data and computer sciences, gender studies, and ethnic studies.”

For the past few decades, research has highlighted the educational, individual, and societal benefits of high impact practices in higher education (Guo-Brennan, 2022; Kuh, 2008, 2013; Lanning & Brown, 2019; Rush & Landgraf, 2023; Wismath & Newberry, 2019). The IHEs studied reference applied learning pedagogy most often and it is often connected to career readiness and experiences in the community. The IHEs refer to high-impact practices that provide opportunities to put theory into practice.

There is a recognition not only of the importance of students gaining real world experience, but the importance of ensuring all students are able to participate, not just those that can afford to take unpaid internships through programs to pay for the internships or provide a stipend (Guo-Brennan, 2022; Kuh, 2013; Rush & Landgraf, 2023). For example, Reed College (2022) pledges to, “COMMIT funding and staffing support so that at least two-thirds of the student body have a significant workplace experience during their years at Reed, including a paid or unpaid internship (Reed stipend), fellowship, research, or artistic, socially, or commercially viable entrepreneurial project.”

Career-focused Curriculum

Liberal arts institutions in this category (balanced) have a less traditional approach to the liberal arts by including professional programs such as teaching and nursing. AAC&U research on what employers are seeking was helpful guidance for institutions seeking out research on how to align their curriculum to employers' needs and assist with workforce demands.

Faculty help prepare students for future careers through the infusion of applied learning into their curriculum offerings. Faculty innovation in the classroom enhances student learning, especially if curricular innovations include current opportunities such as AI.

Williams College (2021) articulates the alignment between the liberal arts and career, aligned in their initiative to, "Invest in supporting students' career preparation through interviewing, networking, resume building and exploration, including entrepreneurial opportunities that reflect the creative and translational spirit of a liberal arts education." Through their initiative, Williams is focusing on the employability of liberal arts graduates through their curriculum that includes applied learning, internships, and programming with their communities.

Community Connections

The majority of the plans referenced their local communities as important to the IHEs. Many of the plans utilize their community for applied learning opportunities and internships and do so in a mutually beneficial manner. However, some IHEs are also building upon the strengths and needs of the community as they are responsive to workforce demands.

The strategic plans studied indicate many of the IHEs framed their innovation around institutional strengths that differentiated them from their peer institutions and the sector of higher education. For example, Rhodes College (2020) indicates, “Our location in a city is distinctive among liberal arts colleges, and our relationship with Memphis is transformative for us.” However, Occidental College (2023) also understands the value its Los Angeles location brings, “Occidental College will be the principal destination for a distinctive urban liberal arts experience, one that engages the full potential of global Los Angeles at its doorstep.” Both institutions understand the importance of location and that their cities set them apart from peers and they builds upon that strength through partnerships and applied learning opportunities for students in their communities (Occidental College, 2023; Rhodes College, 2020).

Location is more than a beautiful setting and great weather, Mount Holyoke (2020) plans include, “Create innovative learning spaces and adopt new technologies to facilitate global/local engagement and create more intentional opportunities to collaborate both on and off campus and around the world.” Institutions such as Agnes Scott College (2021) place a strategic priority on external engagement to, “Develop mission-aligned use of properties and partnerships that support learning, attract students, raise the college’s profile and attract investment” and include developing relationships that are mutually beneficial as an initiative. Institutions in the study connected with their communities on multiple levels including as a resource for work opportunities, partner in projects, collaborator to solve problems.

Transparency Builds Trust and Opportunity

The willingness to share challenges faced by small IHEs is notable during a time when many small colleges seemingly close without warning or to the surprise of constituents (Smetanka, 2024). Dr. Smetanka (2024), interim president of an institution that closed in 2024, calls for greater transparency by college leaders as to the challenges these institutions face to maintain operations and education. Smetanka (2024) indicates, “Besides the high ideals of mission integrity and commitment to truth-finding and truth-telling, the pragmatic reason for this necessary discussion is to limit the pain if an institution must close and to welcome more voices earlier to face the challenges collectively.” Five of the institutions in the study referenced challenges or difficulties they are facing; these references are notable in this study which focuses on innovation, entrepreneurship, and transformation.

The internal challenges mentioned by the strategic plans studied include recruitment and retention; dependency on tuition revenue; the high cost of delivering quality education; academic calendar difficulties; barriers for historically marginalized communities, the high costs of technology; and structural challenges of a shared governance system and the need for rapid decision-making (Brand, 2021; Occidental College, 2023; Reed College, 2022; Rhodes College, 2020; Williams College, 2021).

The IHEs studied illustrate the awareness of community demographics and national trends in higher education as they reflect on external difficulties for their work including racism and the need for equality and justice; strong competition for students and faculty; the public’s lack of understanding of the value of the liberal arts; post-pandemic challenges; national economy, climate change, and the public’s resistance to knowledge/expertise (Brand, 2021; Occidental College, 2023; Reed College, 2022; Rhodes College, 2020; Williams College, 2021).

Conclusion

The traditional liberal arts college has been less focused on careers or jobs than other sectors of higher education, but modern institutions are aligning their liberal arts curriculum with expressed needs for current and future workforce. Through the exploration of campus priorities of peer institutions, colleges and universities seeking this type of transformation can gain insights into how (well) the curricular changes serve the needs of students and employers. This white paper is offered as a resource to those seeking innovation and change.

Appendix A

Institutions of Higher Education included in the Study

Agnes Scott College, Decatur, GA

Cornell College, Mount Vernon, IA

Mount Holyoke College, South Hadley, MA

Occidental College, Los Angeles, CA

Ouachita Baptist University, Arkadelphia, AR

Reed College, Portland, OR

Rhodes College, Memphis, TN

Williams College, Williamstown, MA

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