



If You Love Them, Let Them Go

HOW COLLEGES ARE BOOSTING RETENTION AND
ENROLLMENT BY SHARING COURSES WITH THEIR PEERS

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Foreword

By [MELANIE GOTTLIEB](#)

The prevailing public narrative is that our postsecondary education model is not keeping pace with the needs of learners or the workforce. In addition to changing learner demands, there are significant and compelling business reasons for institutions to evolve the status quo. This year, many American colleges and universities find themselves in a precarious situation. Though postsecondary enrollment has **finally returned** to pre-pandemic levels after five years, our nation stands on the edge of a **projected 15-year demographic decline** that will result in a 13% reduction in the number of incoming traditional-age college students. Of more immediate concern, according to the **latest outlook** from credit rating agency Fitch, are the “uneven” enrollment changes, rising expenses and increased competitive pressures that will squeeze institutional finances even tighter in 2025.

But from crisis comes opportunity. Institutions seeking to grow must reach out to and serve new learner populations while maintaining their focus on retaining more of their current students. The path to graduation is beset with obstacles as today’s learners seek to balance work, family and education. These barriers often can seem insurmountable because of the outdated structures and inadvertent stumbling blocks placed in their way by the institutions purporting to support them.

For institutions to thrive in these uncertain times, postsecondary education must be centered on innovation that serves and supports the learner. There is a strong call for colleges and universities to be more flexible in their approaches to the recognition of learning and awarding of credit, to open pathways, and to shorten the time (and cost) to earn credentials. When institutions commit to **learning mobility**, they prioritize the needs and interests of their students and ensure that educational opportunities are accessible, equitable and tailored to individual learners. It also gives institutions a greater opportunity to attract some of the **nearly 42 million** adult learners with some college credits but no college credential.

Course sharing is one promising tool that can help facilitate learning mobility. In the short term, course sharing gives institutions a flexible means to support student persistence. Over the long run, it can open up new ways of thinking about transfer credits that can help both learners and institutions.

As this whitepaper succinctly demonstrates, collaboration – not competition – is the path forward for higher education. When institutions work together, they better position themselves to help more learners persist, progress, succeed and graduate. When institutions cooperate, they can shore up their financial bottom lines. And when there’s more collaboration, more institutions – and, most importantly, more learners – can win.

Melanie Gottlieb is the Executive Director of The American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO)

Rethinking Higher Ed's Business Model

It's time to face facts: Higher education's traditional business model is failing.

Since peaking at historic highs in **2010**, undergraduate enrollment at our nation's colleges and universities has fallen by about 15% and now stands at just over **15 million students**. Although recent **estimates** show modest enrollment growth since the pandemic, there is little reason for continued optimism.

A significant portion of recent enrollment gains stem not from increasing numbers of freshmen but by attracting more high school students seeking college credit via dual enrollment. The rate of high school graduates immediately matriculating to college has shrunk **by 8 percentage points** in just five years.

This trend may just represent the tip of the iceberg. Because **birth rates** have **continued to decline** since the Great Recession of 2008-09, the number of high school graduates in the United States is **expected to peak** within the next year or two. Higher education is bracing for not one but **two demographic cliffs** – with the second steep drop projected to occur in the middle of the next decade.

The impact of these declines is playing out in real time as more institutions, private and **public** alike, are **closing or merging**. In 2023-24, the higher education sector **shrank by 2%** from the **previous year**. The pace of college closings **accelerated** in 2024, from about two each month to one per week. Many institutions are managing enrollment declines by **eliminating courses and degree programs** to **right-size their budgets**.

As institutions seek to cut their way to financial stability, they are often unintentionally erecting barriers to course access that disrupt and lengthen paths to completion for the very learners they're trying to serve. Recent national data indicates that **57%** of college students are enrolled in programs in which their path to completing a degree on time is blocked because the institution isn't offering required courses at the days, times and modalities accessible to learners. Yet, **Gallup's "2024 State of Higher Education Report"** found



"The troubling financial situations that many institutions now face often lead to cuts that make it difficult to offer the courses and flexible schedules that learners need to move through college and complete their degrees on time. Colleges simply cannot be everything to everyone. Course sharing and collaboration more broadly enable them to focus on their mission while doubling down on completion with minimal costs."

CHARLES ANSELL

Vice President for Research,
Policy and Advocacy
Complete College America



that for adults without a degree, “having control over the days and times that you need to take classes” is the third most-important reason for deciding to enroll or remain in school, behind only opportunities to find a good-paying job and the cost of college.

“Too often, course schedules and availability can be a barrier to learners completing their education on time. Today’s learners receive the greatest value from their investment in higher education when they are able to complete courses at a time and schedule that works for them. Quicker degree completion makes degrees more affordable, and more accessible scheduling places the value of higher education within the reach of more working learners.”

AUSTIN REID, Federal Affairs Advisors, *National Conference of State Legislatures*

Institutions that eliminate classes and programs for financial reasons don’t just make it harder for their current students to access classes at times those individuals need. They can also make themselves less desirable to prospective students who seek broader and more diverse academic options. **Reports estimate that 75%-85%** of learners may change their major. Meanwhile, institutions that are right-sizing might struggle to align academic programs with student demands, given current faculty’s expertise and the high cost of establishing new programs.

A sustainable path forward exists. Not only do colleges and universities face the daunting task of halting enrollment and financial losses, they also must provide the flexibility and course access that students expect. In an unforgiving world where postsecondary institutions are competing for a shrinking pool of potential students, a growing cohort of colleges has found a counterintuitive way to buck this trend: through collaboration.

“Creativity and collaboration can fuel institutions’ ability to increase student success. Thoughtful course exchange arrangements that draw on the best each institution offers allow both to focus on excellence and distinctive programs. Like other academic innovations, course exchange has the potential to help students meet meaningful learning and postgraduate goals with quality and efficiency. By offering learners access to other institutions and sharing their own assets, colleges can create smooth pathways to new educational options and better deploy their own attention and resources.”

JAMIENNE STUDLEY

Past President and Senior Advisor,
WSCUC

Former Deputy Undersecretary,
U.S. Department of Education

Course Sharing: Collaboration Instead of Competition

Institutions using course sharing are demonstrating that they can boost enrollment and retention not by competing for students but by expanding course access through each other's collective capacity.



Course sharing enables students to take approved credit-bearing online classes taught by qualified instructors at other participating accredited institutions. This approach gives students access to the courses they want and need when they want them.



Credits earned through course sharing count the same as if a student had earned them by taking a course offered by their home institution. Because course sharing credits count toward GPA and major and graduation requirements, they remove many of the issues with traditional course transfer.



Faculty review and approve all courses – including syllabi, learning outcomes and faculty credentials. This ensures courses align with the learner's needs and the institution's offerings.



Institutions continue to generate revenue by charging regular tuition and fees to students taking shared courses (subtracting a fee paid to the teaching institution). Institutions are also able to recover tuition dollars that would have been lost if a student took classes elsewhere and attempted to transfer credit back to their current college or if the learner had to drop out because of a course access issue.

“What I’ve seen from working with more than 100 institutions nationally is that enrollment, retention and revenues grow when institutional flexibility increases. If students stop out because they cannot get the courses they need, completion rates can drop by 30 or 40 percentage points. Policies that keep students enrolled and making progress to their degrees – through improved transfer credit policies, prior learning credits and course sharing – generate additional revenue in the long run and help more students graduate.”

TIM RENICK

Founding Executive Director of the
National Institute of Student Success
Georgia State University

Through course sharing, institutions can operate a dynamic, responsive and sustainable academic portfolio that can attract new learners and increase enrollment.



ANGELO STATE UNIVERSITY:

Demonstrating Return on Investment by Keeping Students on Track

Today's college students have more options than ever before. That can make it even more frustrating when students cannot get a required course at the time or in the sequence they need, especially when they need that credit to stay on track to graduate. Too often these students might turn to other institutions or stop out of college.

Angelo State University, a public Hispanic-serving institution of 11,500 students in West Texas, is leveraging Acadeum's course sharing network to solve these retention challenges. Since fall 2021, 370 students have turned to course sharing to earn Angelo State credit by taking courses taught at other accredited institutions. By retaining students who continued for another year, Angelo State estimates that it has generated \$2.85 million in tuition revenue over the past three years.

Angelo State faculty members were understandably nervous about allowing students to take courses at other institutions. But university leaders made the case that when Angelo State works with partner institutions, it can help students stay on track — and help the university's bottom line.

"We tell them that course sharing is a key part of our retention strategy and not about replacing our own courses. When a student completes a class they need through course sharing, they're back on campus the next semester sitting in your classes, participating in your lectures and later graduating from here. That's our goal — to have students back in our classes the following semester and down the road graduating."

MEAGAN WORD, Director of Student Academic Progress, Angelo State University



By retaining students who continued for another year, Angelo State estimates that it has generated **\$2.85 million in tuition revenue** over the past three years.





UNIVERSITY OF MOUNT UNION:

Increasing Online Offerings to Meet Learner Demand

For the University of Mount Union, course sharing has become an integral strategy for helping learners stay on track while also generating revenue for the institution. The private liberal arts university in northeast Ohio initially turned to course sharing for a number of reasons, including to help students maintain athletic eligibility, providing students a path to return to campus after academic suspension, take classes required for graduate school or beef up their transcripts.

By seeing the benefits of course sharing to their students, faculty and staff were motivated by Mount Union's positive experience to construct high-quality online classes and become a teaching institution, which offers courses to other institutions' learners. Mount Union — which before the pandemic had no online presence — now has Ohio's top-ranked online Master of Education program and offers an online MBA and an online master's degree in nursing. Eight of its new online classes carry Quality Matters' national certification, and all new online courses are designed so they can be shared with others.

"We went from being 20 years behind to being a leader in online education and course sharing," said Bryan J. Boatright, associate vice president for academic affairs and dean of graduate, digital and continued learning.

Mount Union has realized impressive revenue gains through course sharing. In 2017, the university's in-person on-campus summer sessions generated just \$246,000. Since then, Mount Union shifted summer-session classes to virtual instruction and adopted course sharing to teach students at other colleges and help its own students take classes at other institutions.

By summer 2024, Mount Union's summer-session enrollment had tripled, while summer-session revenues had grown to nearly \$1.1 million — more than four times what they were just seven years earlier.

"The strategy has been very well received. For a predominantly in-person institution with about 2,300 students, this growth has been a huge deal. More importantly, it has demonstrated to our faculty that by partnering with other institutions via course sharing, we can grow our own numbers in new and profound ways."

BRYAN J. BOATRIGHT,

Associate Vice President for Academic Affairs and Dean of Graduate, Digital and Continued Learning, *University of Mount Union*

Impact Analysis

Early results from these two institutions show more broadly what's possible for higher education.



Retention Impact:

Angelo State University estimates that **70% of students** who participated in course sharing between 2021 and 2024 were not on track to graduate prior to participating in course sharing.

As a result, over a three-year period, Angelo State estimates a **gross return to the university of approximately 9 times the direct revenue** received through course sharing when considering the additional tuition and fees retained from learners who were otherwise at risk of stopping out.



Summer Term Impact:

By using course sharing during the summer, the University of Mount Union demonstrates what's possible. In seven years, it has **tripled its summer enrollment and quadrupled its summer revenues**.

Summer-term enrollment is now equivalent to nearly 42% of Mount Union's fall undergraduate head count, which **generates more than \$1 million** each year for the institution.





Conclusion

Institutions will not stumble on a successful response to current and future enrollment challenges by trying to compete with their peers. Colleges and universities across the country are beginning to demonstrate the power of collaboration through course sharing that leverages other institutions' existing capacity to meet their own independent strategic goals and respond more efficiently and effectively to their learners' needs. When colleges collaborate with other institutions, they are proving they can better serve their students in ways that lead to increased retention and enrollment.



"Our students don't think of course sharing as having to go to another college to get the class they needed," said Word, Angelo State University director of student academic progress. "They see it as Angelo State finding them a solution that allows them to finish their degree at Angelo State and become a graduate of this university."

By sharing in-demand courses and programs, colleges and universities can remove barriers and provide flexible and innovative pathways that help students stay enrolled and make timely progress toward their degrees. Institutions also can recover otherwise lost revenue and create an avenue toward the sustainability of their academic programs.

"Colleges and universities compete in so many areas, from athletic fields to the admissions office. But as our colleges and universities navigate a landscape filled with significant enrollment and financial challenges, the best move for higher education and our nation isn't competing for a shrinking number of students. Rather, it's collaborating to support all students to ensure they have the resources needed to complete their degree or credential. When students win, institutions win too."

JIM HUNDRIESER

Senior Advisor to the President,
NACUBO

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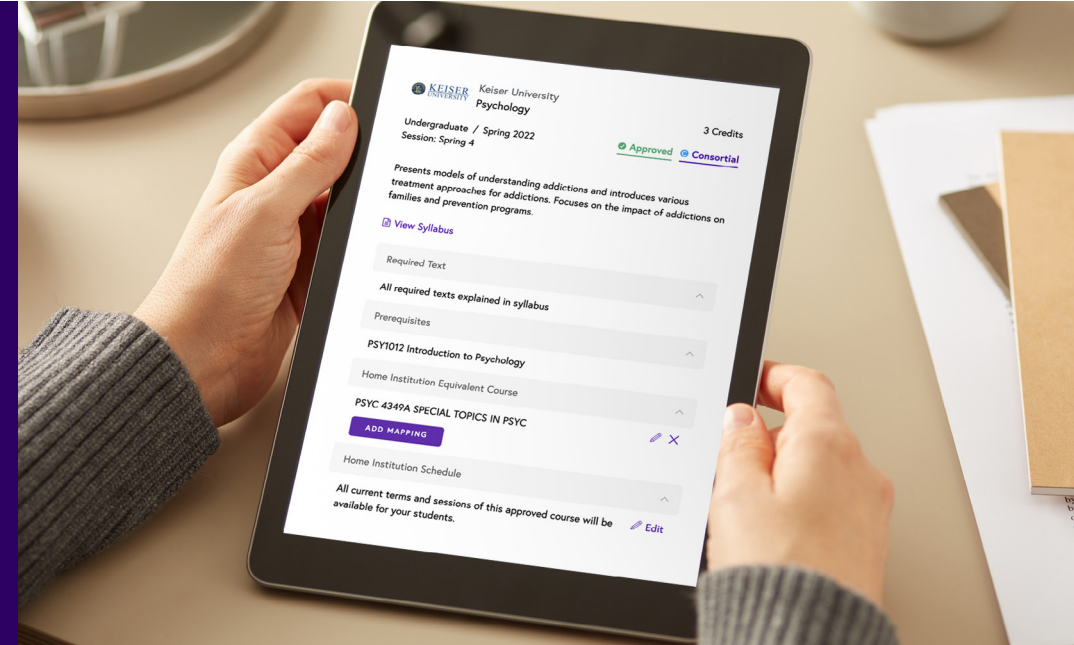
MEAGAN WORD | Director of Student Academic Progress, *Angelo State University*

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AUSTIN REID | Federal Affairs Advisors, *National Conference of State Legislatures*

JAMIENNE STUDLEY | Past President and Senior Advisor, *WSCUC*; Former Deputy Undersecretary, *U.S. Department of Education*



About Acadeum

Acadeum helps colleges and universities expand academic resources that support student progress and equitable access to workforce opportunities. Today, more than 500 higher education institutions are members of the Acadeum network to offer in-demand courses and credentials they need to keep learners on track, and bolster existing or offer new programs. Institutions can improve retention and completion, and offer workforce-aligned and stackable certifications, while also unlocking new revenue to increase financial sustainability.

To learn more about Acadeum, please visit www.acadeum.com.

