

WHITE PAPER

Building IT Agility to Power Teaching & Learning Across Institutional Boundaries

IT's Opportunity To Enable Access For Course Sharing, Resource Sharing, and New Collaborative Business Models In Higher Education



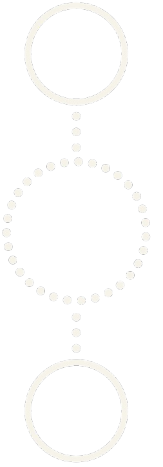
Introduction

Higher Education has long been a site of multi-institutional collaboration, fueling some of the biggest scientific achievements in our lifetimes. In Teaching & Learning, pathways to develop sustained, cross-institutional working relationships have historically been limited. But the tide is shifting. With increasing pressures on campus resources and student enrollment, getting creative and working together is more important than ever. And IT has a critical role to play as the enablers of collaborative models in Teaching & Learning.

For over 20 years, InCommon has provided tailored Identity and Access Management (IAM) solutions to empower secure, scalable, and seamless global collaboration for students, faculty, staff, and researchers. As an organization committed to empowering multi-institutional collaboration for research and higher education, we became curious about the untapped potential of collaborative Teaching & Learning.

From sharing library access to sharing courses, collaborative Teaching & Learning offers schools the opportunity to increase academic breadth without increasing long-term costs. Expanding access to resources beyond campus exponentially increases faculty and deans' ability to innovate, shaping learning experiences that meet the unique needs of their students.

The future of Teaching & Learning is collaborative, and IT teams are uniquely positioned to unlock its full potential through secure, scalable infrastructure.



Over the last year, we've gathered insight on this topic from over 45 stakeholders across 18 institutions, ranging from large research institutions to community colleges and small liberal arts schools. With this white paper, we aim to provide guidance to the higher education community about the opportunities that resource- and course-sharing models present and how the IT community can open doors to new approaches in Teaching & Learning.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Kevin M. Morooney', with a large, stylized loop at the end.

Kevin Morooney
Executive Director, InCommon

Executive Summary

In this white paper, we aim to share our findings on the opportunities for collaboration in Teaching & Learning and IT's critical role to play.

Collaborative Teaching & Learning

IT Enables Partnerships

ACADEMIC CONSORTIA



DRIVEN BY

- Enrollment decline
- Funding uncertainties
- Industry needs

Higher ed organizations maximize offerings to attract and retain students.

RESOURCE SHARING



STUDENT

Learning Options Expanded



Let's make collaborative Teaching & Learning work at scale—get involved and help chart the future. Contact us at help@incommon.org.

The InCommon Federation provides user-friendly, secure, streamlined access for multi-institutional collaboration.

TAKEAWAY 1

Emerging Use Cases in Multi-Institution Teaching & Learning

Collaboration has always been a cornerstone of higher education. As institutions navigate increasing demands to attract and retain students, expanding these collaborative efforts within Teaching & Learning presents a strategic opportunity to enhance academic offerings while containing costs. Many schools are already sharing courses, faculty expertise, and academic resources to broaden student access and enrich learning. In order to develop secure, scalable infrastructure for collaboration, it's key for IT professionals to first understand the importance of these emerging use cases.

Drivers

- Enrollment decline
- Funding uncertainties
- Industry needs

Highlights



Course sharing allows institutions to increase academic breadth while containing costs



Collaboration will be key to adapt and build resilience in an unpredictable landscape



There are a number of interesting models to look at for collaborative Teaching & Learning

Insights

Collaboration is already a fundamental part of how higher education operates. Our findings show that working together in Teaching & Learning, unlocks a number of key **benefits**:



Expanded Academic Breadth

Course sharing allows schools to offer specialized or high-demand courses without the need for additional faculty or resources, giving students access to a broader curriculum.



Improved Student Attraction & Retention

With the enrollment cliff looming, attracting and retaining students in their fields of interest is becoming increasingly difficult. By working together, institutions can expand course and degree offerings to fuel enrollments and successful graduations.



Resource Optimization & Cost Efficiency

Shared courses, degrees, and resources allow academic departments to expand offerings without increasing long-term costs, ensuring high-quality student learning despite resource constraints.



Building Institutional Capacity, Resilience, and Adaptability

As enrollment patterns and funding sources shift, institutions that participate in collaborative models can adapt more efficiently. By building capacity and infrastructure to support cross-institutional collaboration, institutions put themselves in a position to accelerate future partnerships and open the door to new modes of learning.



Faculty Development

Cross-institutional initiatives foster knowledge exchange among educators, particularly those in specialized fields without peers on campus, leading to improved instruction.



Workforce Alignment Course-sharing models can help institutions more readily offer credentials that align with industry needs, strengthening employer partnerships and student career pathways.

Opportunities

Whether your institution is actively engaged in course sharing or just beginning to explore new approaches, the following models offer inspiration for what's possible on your campus.



Course-sharing partnerships

Higher ed institutions are finding creative ways to fill curriculum gaps by partnering with peers, allowing students to enroll in specialized or high-demand classes not available at their home institution. A strong example is the [collaboration between Rio Salado College and Lake Michigan College](#). Lake Michigan College noticed student demand for courses in French, ASL, IT, and business that they were unable to offer through existing faculty and resources. Meanwhile, Rio Salado had these courses readily available. In collaboration, Lake Michigan College expands their course catalog for its students, while Rio Salado reaches new learners—a win-win for both institutions.



Consortia-driven degrees & certificates

Multi-institutional consortia can jointly develop and offer degrees, certificates, or micro-credentials, leveraging faculty expertise and resources across campuses. One shining example of this model is [IDEA](#), highlighted on page 7. Going one step beyond course sharing, IDEA leverages faculty and resources across 20 universities to offer fully online bachelor's, master's, and certificate programs. Institutions can seek out opportunities to join consortia that practice course sharing, and consortia can look to expand their impact by experimenting with this model across member schools.



Resource-sharing initiatives

Sharing academic resources, such as digital libraries, simulation labs, research databases, and instructional technology, across institutions is another way to collaborate in enhancing student learning. Cross-institutional resources like [HathiTrust](#), [EMMA](#), and others maximize accessibility, minimize duplicative efforts, and ensure that all students—regardless of their home institution—have high-quality learning materials.



SPOTLIGHT

The Innovative Digital Education Alliance (IDEA)

The Innovative Digital Education Alliance (IDEA) is a consortium of renowned public universities from across the United States offering degree and certificate programs that span a range of subjects in human sciences and agriculture. IDEA demonstrates how institutions can pool resources to offer fully online degree and certificate programs that no single institution could provide alone. With 20 universities collaborating, students gain access to a wider range of programs while institutions expand their reach. By increasing degrees offered, schools can attract and retain a broader group of students with a wider range of interests. Consortia are an ideal platform to launch such initiatives.



“Many of our home institutions do not offer these programs in any other way, so it’s an opportunity to get a degree from a major university that otherwise would not exist.”

— Lona Robertson, Associate Dean,
University of Arkansas

In 24 years, the Alliance has graduated over 11,500 students, hailing from all 50 US States, across 19 programs. On their own, member universities would not be able to offer the specialized programs that exist under the banner of IDEA.

InCommon has been working closely with IDEA to learn more about their robust, collaborative model and explore how the InCommon Federation can provide secure single sign-on (SSO) for students accessing coursework across multiple learning management systems (LMS). To learn more about their model, [visit their website](#).

TAKEAWAY 2

Secure, Single Sign-On (SSO) Across Partners is Key

As the InCommon community knows well, secure access is essential to enabling successful cross-institutional collaboration. For collaborative Teaching & Learning, Single Sign-On (SSO) simplifies access for students, faculty, and staff who need to engage with digital resources across multiple institutions. In these environments, security remains critical—but so does agility. Institutions need to identify external users quickly and connect them to the right tools without delay. A federated approach strengthens both security and agility, enabling IT teams to move faster while maintaining trust. By leveraging the InCommon Federation, institutions can provide secure, seamless SSO for course- and resource-sharing initiatives—empowering IT departments to fully support the speed, scale, and flexibility that modern collaboration requires.



Highlights



Implementing SSO for multi-institutional collaborations supports ease of use, IT agility, and security



InCommon Federation supports SSO for over 6,000 services and resources, including Instructure's Canvas, NSF Fastlane, Elsevier Journals, and Watermark



LMS providers will have an important role to play to support seamless integration

Insights

For multi-institutional collaboration to succeed, students, faculty, and staff need seamless and secure access to shared courses and resources—without added frustration or roadblocks. By supporting cross-institutional SSO, schools and SaaS providers can remove barriers, strengthen partnerships, and create a smoother experience for everyone involved.

Our discovery process identified a variety of **needs** across stakeholder groups that point to the importance of secure, SSO access for multi-institutional partnerships, summarized below.



Students
need seamless, easy access to learning platforms across institutions to avoid login confusion and ensure uninterrupted participation in their coursework.



Faculty & Staff
need streamlined processes to support external learners' access to instructional resources, reducing time spent troubleshooting to keep the focus on learning.



Security Leaders
need clear authentication and access management approaches that meet security standards, protect student data, and ensure compliance across schools.



IT and Identity Mgmt Teams
need a unified access solution for external learners that simplifies account management and maximizes resource efficiency.

ENABLING SCALABLE COLLABORATION

The InCommon Federation

The InCommon Federation enables secure, scalable collaboration within and across institutional boundaries. By leveraging its trusted infrastructure, institutions can offer their faculty, students, staff, and researchers secure Single Sign-On (SSO) access to everything from parking passes to shared courses to NIH's National Library of Medicine.



Access to Shared Resources

As those working in higher education IT know well, ensuring easy, seamless access to resources while simultaneously maintaining high standards of security is a challenge. Finding this balance is even more complicated when tasked with enabling access for shared resources with users spanning multiple institutions. The InCommon Federation provides students, faculty, staff, and researchers seamless access to thousands of external resources with their home institution credentials. From library systems to Learning Management Systems (LMS), the Federation reduces account sprawl and eliminates the need to manage multiple credentials.



Built-In Security & Compliance

The InCommon Federation provides a pre-vetted identity framework that has been developed and refined over decades of use in cross-institutional research. Rather than having to build shared policies and practices from scratch, organizations leveraging the Federation can plug into an existing framework that is trusted by many hundreds of institutions, confidently extending access to external users while ensuring data protection and regulatory compliance.



Supporting Teaching & Learning

The Federation already plays a role in Teaching & Learning, helping campuses access library content and other academic resources through secure, trusted connections. Now, we're working to deepen that support for a growing range of use cases, including course- and resource-sharing partnerships.

Read more on page 14 about our next steps to enable multi-institutional Teaching & Learning via the InCommon Federation.



Opportunities

There are a number of opportunities for stakeholders across the higher education landscape to build IT capacity and agility to facilitate successful cross-institutional collaboration.



Participate in the InCommon Academy

The InCommon Academy brings practitioners together to tackle shared challenges and implement new solutions through hands-on training, events, and accelerator programs. Campus IT professionals can [join the learning community](#) to get support on leveraging the InCommon Federation to fuel collaboration across institutional boundaries.



The Role of the LMS

Learning Management System (LMS) providers play a crucial role in enabling secure SSO access for multi-institutional collaboration. By supporting authentication through federated solutions like InCommon, providers can simplify implementation for IT teams, reduce login complexity for students and faculty, and make course-sharing efforts scalable.



Connect With Colleagues Across Departments

IT professionals are uniquely positioned to connect the dots across campus. While faculty and academic leaders often drive innovation in Teaching & Learning, those efforts can only scale when they're supported by secure, sustainable infrastructure. Strengthening internal connections fosters alignment between institutional strategy, faculty interests, and digital enablement, ensuring that academic innovation has the technical foundation it needs to succeed.

"We're excited to leverage the InCommon Federation to provide SSO for course sharing, giving our team a foundation to support access for new collaborations without reinventing the wheel every time."

— Marc Wallman, CIO and VP for IT,
North Dakota State University

TAKEAWAY 3

Building Critical Connections Across IT and Teaching & Learning

Successful course- and resource-sharing partnerships require strong communication and alignment across academic, technical, and administrative teams. Faculty and academic teams are driving innovation in the classroom. In our findings, many collaborative Teaching & Learning projects were conceived of by faculty working together across institutions. Such initiatives need technical and administrative support. By creating supported pathways for Teaching & Learning partnerships, technical and administrative leaders can open doors for faculty and staff to innovate—delivering outcomes from student attraction to increased retention and engagement.

Highlights



The InCommon Community is co-creating practical resources to support access for collaborative Teaching & Learning



IT governance is a critical component of building successful course- and resource-sharing partnerships



Supported technical pathways can open new doors for innovation

Insights

Over the course of dozens of discovery conversations, the need for deeper working relationships across a wide range of institutional stakeholders became clear.



Silos persist between Teaching & Learning and IT

Faculty and academic leadership are often the orchestrators of course- and resource-sharing partnerships, while IT teams remain disconnected from the planning process. IAM and LMS teams may not be aware of such partnerships, limiting their ability to proactively support these initiatives.



Supported Pathways Can Open Doors

By addressing the technical and administrative needs of course- and resource-sharing initiatives, higher ed institutions can build capacity and dexterity for deeper cross-institutional collaboration. This foundation offers a supported pathway for faculty and staff to drive innovation, activate new partnerships, and strengthen both student and institutional outcomes.



Collaborative Governance Fuels Success

Sharing courses and resources across institutions requires alignment on standardized policies and practices in key areas, including registration, curriculum and more. IT governance is a critical step, including developing unified approaches for data privacy, authentication standards, and security protocols. Utilizing a federated approach can help streamline IT governance decisions as well as contribute to sustainable infrastructure that can be leveraged for cross-institutional partnerships of many kinds.



Shared Understanding Enables IT Agility

IT teams are motivated to support academic collaboration—but to move with speed and confidence, they need a clear understanding of academic objectives and the capacity requirements involved. When academic and IT stakeholders work together through shared governance, they foster alignment, enabling IT to build the flexibility and security required to scale cross-institutional Teaching & Learning.

Opportunities

To translate these insights into action, InCommon is bringing together campus leaders, academics, and IT practitioners from across the higher education landscape to co-create **practical resources to support access for multi-institutional Teaching & Learning**. By fostering deeper working relationships between IT, faculty, and leadership, we can create scaffolding that not only supports current course- and resource-sharing initiatives, but also lays the groundwork for future innovation.

Building on the findings presented in this white paper, our aim is to develop supported pathways for cross-institutional collaboration in Teaching & Learning. As we begin to develop these pathways, we want to hear from you—what use cases are you exploring, and what resources would help you succeed?

We're looking for input from community members interested in exploring any of the following:



The benefits that collaborative Teaching & Learning models could bring to your institution



A use case you'd like considered as resources get developed



Strengthening your federated identity infrastructure to enable collaboration

We'd love to hear what challenges you're facing and where collaboration might help. Whether you're just starting to explore shared learning or already running a program, let's talk.

Contact us at help@incommon.org with "Teaching & Learning" in the subject line to collaborate.

Conclusion

Higher education is navigating pivotal moments, with enrollment challenges mounting and resources becoming more constrained. Simultaneously, the need to provide students with quality, engaging, and supported learning experiences has never been greater. In the current environment, working together will bring us farther than working in silos ever could.

Collaborative Teaching & Learning offers a powerful solution to expand academic offerings and foster innovation, and **IT leadership has an opportunity to create scalable, secure, and connected spaces for students, faculty, and staff across institutions.**

Through this white paper, we've highlighted the opportunities, challenges, and key success factors for course- and resource-sharing initiatives, drawn from InCommon's consultations with over 45 stakeholders across 18 institutions. As these models continue to evolve, IT professionals have a unique opportunity to partner with academic leaders to develop infrastructure that makes collaboration frictionless. We're committed to supporting this effort through the InCommon Federation, enabling user-friendly, secure Single Sign-On (SSO) that empowers institutions to connect with confidence.

Looking ahead, we're excited to engage the InCommon community in shaping the future of collaborative Teaching & Learning. Whether you're new to InCommon or a long time contributor, your insights and engagement will be essential to driving this work forward. Together, we'll unlock the full potential of multi-institutional collaboration.

Let's make collaborative Teaching & Learning work at scale—get involved and help chart the future with InCommon.

InCommon® Forward together.

incommon.org

help@incommon.org