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**News**

A New Model Community College

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When for-profit companies team up with traditional colleges to offer instruction, many academics object. The Princeton Review inked a [deal to offer a nursing program](#) for a Massachusetts community college last year, and faculty unions scoffed that the high price students must pay for the program violated the traditional community college mission of open access and public accountability. Critics said the same about Kaplan's [failed deal](#) to take on California students locked out of financially strapped community colleges.

In contrast, there has been relatively little controversy over a different kind of partnership between a company and a private college: a joint effort of Tiffin University, a small private institution in northeast Ohio, and [Altius Education](#), a for-profit company based in San Francisco.

In 2008, Tiffin and Altius opened [Ivy Bridge College](#), an online community college that offers a general studies associate degree program targeted at traditional-age students who wish to transfer to four-year institutions. Though [tuition](#) for an academic year of full-time study is \$9,450, which is considerably more than a typical community college would cost, financial aid is available. Tiffin handles the academics — its accreditation extends to Ivy Bridge — and Altius handles the enrollment management.

Both sides argue that this divide helps maintain the program's academic integrity, while also ensuring that the institution reaches out to a greater number of students, keeping the partnership financially viable. A year ago, at the annual meeting of the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities, Michael B. Goldstein, a lawyer who heads the higher education practice at Dow Lohnes, [praised Ivy Bridge](#), suggesting that it could be a model for other "joint ventures" between financially slumping private institutions and for-profit partners.

Traditional opponents of partnerships with proprietary entities have few criticisms of the Ivy Bridge model so far. Still, it is relatively new, and few outside of Tiffin know much about it.

Success So Far

What appears to set Ivy Bridge apart from both traditional community colleges and other online institutions are its student support services. For instance, every Ivy Bridge student is assigned a "personal success coach" — a non-instructional employee — who helps with everything from course selection to academic support to career counseling.

Cam Cruickshank, Altius co-founder and vice president of enrollment operations, says that this "heightened level of student support" explains some of Ivy Bridge's initial success. Though Cruickshank acknowledges that just over two years of data are not enough to pass judgment, he is cautiously optimistic about the [preliminary student success figures](#).

Ivy Bridge started out with 65 students in 2008; it now has nearly 1,600. Cruickshank projects the college will have more than 2,000 students in the upcoming spring and summer terms. Its academic calendar is divided into six terms, so that students have numerous opportunities to start.

In the short life of the college, its average term-over-term persistence rate is about 85 percent. If the college were on the traditional semester system, Cruickshank estimates that this would equate to a retention rate in the mid-60s. The national average semester-

over-semester retention rate for full-time students at community colleges nationally is around 55 percent. After the first 13 terms — just over two years — about half of the college's initial cohort is either still enrolled, has graduated with an associate degree or has transferred to a four-year institution. There are no comparable figures for the average community college; however, the national average three-year graduation rate for community colleges is about 25 percent.

Ivy Bridge has [transfer articulation agreements](#) with nearly 70 institutions, including public institutions like Arizona State University, private institutions like the New School and for-profit institutions like Grand Canyon University. So far, about half of the students who have left, transferred out of, or graduated from Ivy Bridge went on to enroll in Tiffin's online baccalaureate degree program or attend its home campus in Ohio, a financial boon for the tuition-driven institution.

The terms of the deal between Altius and Tiffin are covered by a nondisclosure agreement, but the program is clearly beneficial to Tiffin in terms of enrollment. Ivy Bridge students now account for a significant share of Tiffin's undergraduate population. Of Tiffin's 3,815 undergraduates this fall, 1,613, or 42 percent, were degree-seeking students enrolled through Ivy Bridge.

Sarah Horn, Ivy Bridge's executive director of student support services, says that the students she talks with who choose the program over a traditional community college do so not only because of the flexibility of taking courses online — which helps attract students from areas where there may not be a nearby community college — but also because Ivy Bridge is “very student-centered.”

One fear many educators have had about privatizing the community college model is that doing so might serve only wealthy, white students. So far, that's not the case at Ivy Bridge. The average age of an Ivy Bridge student is 30. More than three-fourths are older than 21. Sixty-five percent are female. Nearly 40 percent are black, 36 percent are white and 7 percent are Hispanic. Ninety percent are eligible for Pell Grants, and the average household family income is \$20,554. Eighty percent have a household income of less than \$30,000.

There is one “personal success coach” for about every 80 students in the program. The college initially outsourced these coaches to [InsideTrack](#), but last year it brought them in-house; they are now employed by Ivy Bridge, LLC, the corporate structure of the venture between Tiffin and Altius. Horn notes that about half have a graduate degree in some field — the minimum requirement is a baccalaureate degree — and most have experience in social work, counseling or hospitality. These coaches check in with their students' progress in the classroom once a week, typically by telephone. Though the weekly meetings are not required, most of the college's students take advantage of them. Three-fourths of the students engage with their coaches on a weekly basis either by telephone, e-mail or Facebook.

“These are often students who may not be connecting with anyone else,” Horn explains. “They talk about how everything is going, both in class and in life. They set goals and help students follow through with them. When you're a single adviser for about 4,000 or so students [at a struggling community college], you just can't get to every request. Our coaches are held accountable to be proactive. The mission here is that we're not going to wait for problems to arise to help our students.”

Why Tiffin Needed a Partner

Prior to opening Ivy Bridge, Tiffin was already offering a number of online programs. There were only 52 online associate degree students then, but the university intended to grow online and attract more.

“We were clicking along pretty well in terms of enrollment and weren't in any financial difficulties, but we don't have a big endowment,” explains Paul Marion, president of Tiffin, which has a \$6 million endowment. “Still, we wanted to ramp up our associate degree program but didn't want to put start-up money into it. We thought we had an interesting concept and looked to partner with an investment group to get start-up funds and also get the enrollment moving along faster. We've always been a fairly entrepreneurial institution and have been willing to look at new options and opportunities.”

Ultimately, Marion acknowledges that the partnership with Altius — which he was unable to discuss in detail because of the nondisclosure agreement — helps Tiffin financially, since it is “growing its enrollment with someone else's money.” Also, though he says this was not the objective of starting the online college, Marion admits that Ivy Bridge “could be sold at some point in the future ... if someone makes us an offer we can't refuse.”

Despite the financial boost the partnership gives to Tiffin, Marion says he and his colleagues would not have started Ivy Bridge if they did not approve of its academic direction.

“We weren't going to cheapen or degrade our academic quality or our admissions processes or anything like that,” Marion says. “If we'd have been forced to drop our admissions standards or water down our curriculum, then we would have backed out. I mean, I

wouldn't get into bed with just anybody on this. I wanted a partner that we would be comfortable with and for them to understand our commitment to keeping our reputation."

Jason Slone, Ivy Bridge's interim campus executive officer, is one of those academics who came from the traditional Tiffin campus as a faculty member and started out with doubts about the partnership.

"I wasn't sure what to make of it at first," Slone says of Ivy Bridge. "I guess, you know, for-profit universities don't have the best reputation, real or imagined, among faculty members."

Reassurance came in the form of divided responsibilities. The way Slone describes it, the wall between what is Tiffin's and Altius's responsibilities at Ivy Bridge is quite clear. All academic responsibilities and management, including course design and instruction, are controlled by Tiffin, which has hired additional faculty for Ivy Bridge. The "Cadillac enrollment management" of the college, as Slone calls it, is controlled by Altius.

If there are pitfalls and challenges at Ivy Bridge, Slone says they are similar to those faced by nearly any traditional institution. For example, he says his biggest challenge is determining how much remediation the institution should offer its least prepared students.

Unlike a typical community college, Ivy Bridge is not open-admission; however, its admissions standards cannot be called exclusive. It has a high school grade point average requirement of 1.8; students with a GED, and therefore no GPA, are conditionally admitted. Those with a GPA of less than 1.8 can lobby the college for admission by responding to an essay prompt and submitting a writing sample.

A 'Seductive' Idea

Tiffin does not have a faculty senate or equivalent, primarily because the college is small enough for all faculty members to meet monthly. Still, there are three standing committees of faculty that make recommendations to the full faculty. Given this, most faculty members who were around when Ivy Bridge was introduced played some small role in helping shape it.

John Millar, professor of management and dean emeritus, who has been at the college for 29 years, remembers that he and his faculty colleagues had two main concerns when the idea of Ivy Bridge and a partnership with a proprietary entity was brought before them: who was developing the curriculum and who was hiring the faculty.

"It was clear the only way faculty would support this was if the program development was ours, and [Ivy Bridge] hired faculty from [Tiffin's] three schools," Millar says. "Well, there are people in the administration of the academic side [at Ivy Bridge] who were part of the full-time faculty here at Tiffin. Also, the course designs came from people who are here on campus, so there have been no surprises."

Millar also notes that having open-minded partners has helped Ivy Bridge.

"This has been smooth because [Altius] didn't come in with a preconceived notion of what higher education should be like," Millar says. "When this idea first broke we all asked who was going to run the academic show. Faculty made it clear that we would have to run the academic show or this would be a war. Our president understood that and the investors understood that too."

Another source of skepticism of some for-profit outfits is that their lack of tenure clashes with traditional systems for assuring job security and academic freedom at most nonprofit colleges. But Tiffin has no tenure system, Millar said, noting that all full-time faculty are hired on short-term contracts, typically of two or four years. The same hiring practices hold for Ivy Bridge, making it easier to shift faculty to needed areas.

This past summer, Tiffin was [approved for continuing accreditation](#) by the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools for the next ten years. The report by the visiting team included some optimistic comments about Ivy Bridge.

"It is evident that the university is embracing innovation and change with regard to online programs and Ivy Bridge entrepreneurship ventures," reads the report. "The university has stayed true to its mission in these new opportunities.... The concept of the Ivy Bridge partnership is an excellent strategic initiative. It addresses an underserved population through a strong curriculum, efficient and effective academic support, excellent instruction, and a very good online portal for program delivery."

Though the Higher Learning Commission lately has been seen as tough on for-profit education — [rejecting two "change of control" requests](#) to have accreditation continue with the purchases of nonprofit colleges last summer — Sylvia Manning, the accreditor's

president, says it does not “judge an institution on its ownership status” but on the “quality of its education.” Still, Manning offered no comments specifically about the Ivy Bridge model, simply deferring to the visiting team’s report.

Many officials from Ohio, particularly those representing traditional community colleges and faculty unions, have little to say about Ivy Bridge, if only because the online college is not yet known by many. Still, some traditional critics of partnerships with for-profit entities are not convinced of the long-term merits of the Ivy Bridge model.

“They are hoping for a payoff, and I’d be interested to see what what they’ve realized so far (three years’ worth now),” wrote David Witt, past president of the Ohio Conference of the American Association of University Professors and professor of family development at the University of Akron. “Tiffin’s a small school; however, the ideas they are employing are seductive to cash-strapped administrators everywhere. I just doubt the payoff for going for-profit is going to be worth the damage that is being done to higher education now, and long term.”

— **David Moltz**

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