Testimony to the U.S. House Committee on Education and the Workforce

By Dr. Jeffrey R. Docking, President, Adrian College
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Chairman Walberg, Ranking Member Scott, and distinguished members of this Committee:

It is truly an honor to appear before you today to discuss one of the most exciting innovations in higher education in my lifetime.

For the past twenty years, I have served as President of Adrian College. My career in higher education spans more than thirty-seven years. Adrian is a traditional liberal arts college of 1,700 students, founded in 1859. It is located thirty-five miles south of Ann Arbor, Michigan, in a predominantly rural community, with a sizeable percentage of first-generation students.

Ten years ago, I reached an unfortunate but inescapable conclusion: the current higher education business model is hopelessly broken. College is too expensive. Students are taking on too much debt and are not learning the skills necessary to pay it off, buy homes, and start families. The federal government is increasingly and understandably reluctant to expand funding for student financial aid, and unlimited student loans are quickly coming to an end. Whether we like it or not, a reckoning has arrived because the system is completely unsustainable—except at a handful of elite universities with multi-billion-dollar endowments.

This broken business model is leading to the closure of dozens of colleges each year. This is a crisis, and something must change quickly before hundreds more institutions become insolvent. America's higher education system—long the envy of the world—requires significant innovation.

At Adrian College, we often say, **"Innovate or die."**

In 2019, I convinced two recent Harvard graduates to move to Adrian and work with me on an idea we believed could reshape higher education. Our goal was to create a model that would:

- Lower tuition costs;
- Fix the broken business model of most colleges and universities;
- Offer new, in-demand majors that the economy needs and students want; and
- Ultimately, save hundreds—if not thousands—of colleges that may otherwise close in the coming years.

The good news is—we succeeded. This innovation has now been adopted by more than 130 colleges nationwide, with over 10,000 students currently taking classes in what we call **"The College of the Future."**

How It Works

The root cause of most college expenses is inefficiency. Colleges and universities are inherently inefficient—not out of malice or mismanagement, but because the structure of higher education was built over two centuries ago. If we are serious about lowering tuition and fixing the business model, we must address inefficiency head-on.

To do that, we incubated a platform at Adrian College that enables colleges and universities to seamlessly share classes across nearly every discipline with other institutions in our consortium. This platform—called **Rize**—is central to the innovation I will discuss today, because it leverages technology in ways never before used to remake the business model of higher education.

At first glance, sharing classes among colleges may sound simple: just turn on a Zoom screen so students across the country can tune in. But in reality, it's quite complex—especially if you want to maintain high academic standards and preserve the traditional on-campus college experience that we all value.

Consider these challenges with sharing classes:

- What happens if a student on the West Coast wants to take a synchronous 8:00 a.m. class from a college on the East Coast? Do they need to get up at 4:00 am to get ready for class?

- How does a student argue a grade, seek help with a paper, or get excused for illness when the professor isn't on their home campus?

- How do we charge students for shared classes when financial aid packages differ for every student?

- Most importantly, how do we scale shared classes to achieve the efficiency needed to lower costs and tuition?

These were the questions we faced when we built this platform between 2018 and 2020. We solved them all—and today, over 10,000 students are taking shared classes, synchronously or asynchronously, at colleges nationwide.

Colleges can now offer these classes at a fraction of the traditional cost, and those savings can be passed along to students and families through lower tuition and fees. At Adrian College, our goal is to reduce tuition by 20–30 percent over the next several years simply by offering many of our courses through this shared model.

To illustrate the impact: Adrian College has organically reduced its academic payroll by more than $2 million—or roughly 13 percent of our academic budget—by not replacing retiring faculty and instead teaching their courses through the shared model. The size of our faculty has decreased significantly, reflecting true efficiency and real change.

The financial benefits extend far beyond cost savings. When schools collaborate to increase efficiency and reduce expenses, they can also offer entirely new majors, minors, and certificates that were previously out of reach.

At Adrian College, we have launched 38 new majors, minors, and certificate programs for our residential undergraduates in just five years—without hiring a single new professor. This nearly doubled the number of programs available to our students by supplementing their on-campus courses with a few shared online courses.

And these new majors are exactly what students and employers are asking for. Adrian now offers programs in artificial intelligence, cybersecurity, data analytics, computer science, web design, public health, neuroscience, supply chain management, professional sales, and more. Last year, over 125 freshmen indicated they planned to enroll in one of these new majors—representing more than $2.5 million in tuition revenue that would have been lost had those students chosen another college.

These programs prepare students for high-demand, high-paying careers our economy urgently needs. By virtue of these new offerings, we have reduced our overall budget while also realizing a 13 percent increase in revenue—transforming the financial future of our college.

This is not theoretical. It's happening now. Nationally, more than 600 new majors have been launched across consortium schools, with new ones being approved every week. These institutions are nimble, innovative, and realistic about the need for change. They understand that the future of higher education depends on adaptation—not higher tuition, larger federal outlays, or reliance on donors.

We are taking our future into our own hands through partnerships with one another—and it's working.

The Financial Model

In the traditional model, if a college wants to start a new major—say, Supply Chain Management—it must hire a professor, provide salaries, benefits, retirement plans, office space, and technology support. The total investment often exceeds $500,000 before the first student even enrolls. Then the college must hope enough students sign up to justify the cost. In fact, 55 percent of new majors never break even after five years, meaning they have to be subsidized by higher tuition for students.

In our shared model, the cost is dramatically lower. Colleges pay a subscription fee of about $15,000 to access the courses required for a new major, plus roughly $500 per student per class.

That's a start-up cost of $15,000–$20,000 versus $500,000—a complete transformation of the financial equation.

For example, Adrian College wanted to launch a Supply Chain Management degree. We already had a strong business program, but lacked that specialization. Lasell University in Newton, Massachusetts, offered it—and through our consortium, they shared the five courses we needed. Within months, we had a fully approved Supply Chain Management program.

Part of our payment goes to Lasell for sharing its courses; part goes to the Rize platform we incubated at Adrian to fund continued expansion and to support the sixty Rize employees who make this model possible nationwide.

Key Advantages of the Model

Preserving the On-Campus Experience
This innovation maintains the best aspects of American higher education: living on campus, forming lifelong friendships, competing in athletics, and learning from dedicated professors. Because only a few courses per major are shared, the vast majority of coursework remains taught on campus by home faculty.

Small Class Sizes
Shared classes are intentionally small—typically no more than 25–30 students. If demand grows, additional adjuncts are hired through the consortium to ensure quality and personalization remain intact.

Continuous Improvement
The pooling of many colleges' financial resources and the combined scale of students enables other unique benefits. Each year, industry experts, experienced practitioners, faculty, and instructional designers review and update courses to ensure alignment with current industry needs. For example, Google provides input annually to our Computer Science classes, *and existing employees of X, Y, and Z, among many others, sit on our consortium's curriculum committees to ensure that what we are teaching remains hyper-relevant.*

So it's not just that this model is much more affordable for colleges. It also enables a level of regular curricular improvement and employer partnership that no one college could ever hope to pull off on its own. We are lowering costs while improving the instruction we give students.

Real-World Learning
Each course concludes with a capstone project in which students solve real-life problems for businesses or organizations. Students love this applied learning and often highlight these projects on their résumés.

Proven Student Satisfaction
Last year, 84 percent of students reported that shared courses were as good as—or better than—their traditional on-campus classes. They love the option to take some of their classes online, especially post-COVID, and they enjoy the convenience the Rize platform offers for taking courses synchronously or asynchronously.

Academic Integrity and Faculty Oversight
Every shared course and program must go through the traditional faculty governance process that has safeguarded academic quality for over two centuries. At Adrian, all 38 new programs were reviewed and approved by full faculty vote. No program can launch without faculty oversight of learning outcomes, readings, assessments, and rigor.

The Future of Higher Education

This consortium, combined with the Rize platform, will reshape higher education for decades to come. The ultimate goal is to lower tuition costs for students and families while providing the most practical, high-quality education possible.

As more institutions join, more majors, minors, and certificate programs will become available—and they will continue to improve through annual reviews with industry leaders. Eventually, even the smallest colleges will be able to offer hundreds of programs they could never afford to start on their own. These savings will be passed along to students through market competition.

As I stated earlier, at Adrian, we expect tuition to decrease by 30 percent over the next several years as we fully leverage the benefits of this model.

The **College of the Future** is hybrid—and that's a good thing. It preserves the traditional four-year, on-campus experience we all value while giving students access to modern, relevant, and affordable courses that prepare them for today's workforce: better courses, more majors, lower costs.

Conclusion

Every major challenge in our nation can be solved through innovation and the American can-do spirit—including the crisis facing higher education.

What I hope you take from my testimony today is that a growing number of college presidents and institutions are collaborating as never before to reimagine the future—one that maximizes innovation, reduces tuition, leverages industry expertise, and delivers rigorous, relevant, and affordable education.

This change is exciting, authentic, and happening now—with great success.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and members of the Committee. I look forward to your questions.
