



# COPLAC - The Evolution of a Vision 1987-2014

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# COPLAC – The Evolution of a Vision

## 1. Present at the Creation – 1986-1992

In the summer of 1986, David G. Brown, then Chancellor at The University of North Carolina Asheville, had an idea. Those who have worked with Dr. Brown know him to be something of a perpetual motion machine for generating good ideas, but this one was particularly fruitful. Dr. Brown recognized that the character and mission and selectivity in recruitment and admissions of UNC Asheville as a college small by choice, focusing upon undergraduate liberal learning, made it an outlier in the University of North Carolina system. Reflecting upon his familiarity with the American higher education landscape (he had recently served as Chair of the Board of the American Association for Higher Education), Brown noticed that there were other institutions of a similar nature scattered throughout the nation, and observed that it might be mutually beneficial to build links between them. This was the initial spark that grew into today's Council of Public Liberal Arts Colleges (COPLAC). Indeed, it can even be seen as the discovery of a previously unrecognized segment of the American collegiate scene, the public liberal arts college.

Chancellor Brown had the institutional research office at UNC Asheville compile a list of comparable institutions, arranged phone conversations with well over a dozen of their chief executives, and personally visited St. Mary's College of Maryland and Mary Washington College in Virginia. An initial list of 15 institutions was narrowed to 12, the Presidents/Chancellors (and in a few cases the chief academic officers) of which were invited to convene in Asheville in May of 1988. Of the dozen schools, those which participated were:

1. The Evergreen State College (Olympia, Washington)
2. Mary Washington College (Now the University of Mary Washington; Fredericksburg, Virginia)
3. New College of Florida (Sarasota, Florida)
4. Northeast Missouri State College (Now Truman State University; Kirksville, Missouri)
5. The University of Minnesota Morris (Morris, Minnesota)
6. The College of Charleston (Charleston, South Carolina)
7. Keene State College (Keene, New Hampshire)
8. Ramapo College (Mahwah, New Jersey)
9. The University of North Carolina Asheville (Asheville, North Carolina)

According to Dr. Bettina Blake, then Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs at the University of Minnesota Morris, the group sat around the UNC Asheville Chancellor's residence living room, and, in turn, described their institutions, generally being intrigued by their similarities (and differences).

At this point, many of these institutions and their chief executives felt themselves to be largely invisible in the panoply of American higher education. So, an important aspect of the initial urge to consort with other, similar colleges and universities was to gain higher visibility, individually and collectively.

The nascent group did not meet in 1989, but in 1990 President Robert Scott convened the first summer meeting of the public liberal arts colleges at Ramapo College of New Jersey. Since then, COPLAC has met each summer, at a host member institution (See Appendix 1). This meeting was also attended by John Ross, who represented a higher education public relations firm “College Connections.” Ramapo, Evergreen, Northeast Missouri and UNC Asheville hired College Connections to try to build the recognition of the public liberal arts sector. The other attending institutions were invited to join this endeavor, but chose not to, apparently for financial reasons. This association continued until 1995, until the untimely death of the College Connections partner, Carol Halstead, who had been working most closely with COPLAC, after which the organization made a transition to working with the firm Dick Jones Communications, beginning in 1998.

At about this same time, Richard Moll, who had done extensive work in college admissions, supplemented his 1985 book *Public Ivies* (which focused largely on flagship state universities) with a helpful article on small public ivies. The article appeared in a personal finance newsletter, *Bottom Line – Personal*.

At this early period in the history of COPLAC, some of the most active campus CEO’s, especially David Brown, Joe Olander, Charles McClain and Bob Scott, also initiated contacts with two other national figures in higher education which ultimately bore fruit for the new consortium. Brown met with Edward Fiske, while the latter was visiting Asheville, and persuaded him to add a category of “small public liberal arts colleges” to the *Fiske Guide to Colleges*. Darrell Krueger, then Provost at Northeast Missouri strengthened a contact with Martin Nemko, which ultimately led to a conference/retreat at the Wingspread Conference Center of the Johnson Foundation in Racine, Wisconsin. That meeting, in turn, generated the creation of a book *The Seven Principles in Action: Improving Undergraduate Education* (1995) for which Nemko wrote a “preface.” (This work is based upon “*Seven principles of good practice in undergraduate education*,” originally framed by Arthur Chickering and Zelda Gamson in 1986.) Nemko is the author of *How to Get an Ivy League Education at a Public University*.

In its early days, the consortium of public liberal arts colleges sometimes used the nomenclature of “the small public ivies.” This designation seemed to some of the group’s leaders to point to the excellence of the liberal education offered on these campuses, and to the selectivity of student recruitment and admissions there. This denomination, however, was not universally embraced. Others felt that its accuracy could be questioned and, perhaps more importantly, there was some discomfort with the implications of elitism that the “Ivy League” designation connoted.

The 1990 meeting at Ramapo was followed in 1991 by the second summer event, this time on the opposite coast at The Evergreen State College, hosted by then Interim President Les Purce. It was at this meeting that the group decided on the name “Council of Public Liberal Arts Colleges” or COPLAC. Some of the participants thought this nomenclature lacked a certain panache, but no

better denomination was offered. Northeast Missouri State University offered at this meeting to begin the work of building and maintaining a data base for the member institutions, and, in preparation for the next meeting in Minnesota, Chancellor David Johnson offered the services of the University of Minnesota system legal office to investigate and initiate the process of formal incorporation. The University of North Carolina Asheville undertook the role of serving as the fiscal agent for the consortium.

A year later, 1992, COPLAC met between the coasts, at the University of Minnesota's Morris campus. On the occasion of this session, COPLAC formally incorporated as a not-for-profit enterprise in the State of Minnesota, becoming, in a sense, a "real" rather than an ad hoc organization. The consortium nearly lost a large contingent of its leadership when Chancellor Johnson hosted the group on a now-legendary pontoon boat ride on Lake Minnewaska, which combined the threat of a Titanic-like nautical disaster with the absurdity of a Garrison Keillor sketch!

From 1986 to 1992, it is somewhat difficult to pinpoint with accuracy the exact "membership" of COPLAC: since there was not a formal organization, nor dues, nor membership criteria as such, "members" were regarded as institutions which attended one of the foundational events. So, some colleges such as St. Mary's College of Maryland and Sonoma State University in California participated in one or more of the early discussions, but did not join COPLAC, once there WAS a COPLAC to join. (Both those institutions did subsequently become members, and are so today.)

### The Way We Were – 1986-1992

What, in those foundational days, was the glue which bound these diverse institutions together? What did they think they had in common, before there were formal criteria for membership in COPLAC?

To begin with, all the colleges and universities involved in the creation of the consortium were **public** schools. This seems obvious, but, on a second look, their public character is more complex and faceted than it first seems. Today's COPLAC colleges are all "state" institutions, often part of some larger more-or-less integrated state system (e.g., The University of North Carolina; The University of Minnesota; the University of Maine). But they arrived at that status by rather varied routes.

The College of Charleston began in 1770, and about half a century later became a municipal institution, which it remained until 1970, at which point it became part of the South Carolina system of higher education. St. Mary's College began its life as a female seminary. The University of Maine at Farmington was first a teacher training institution, and merged into the Maine system in the 1970s. So, too, today's Truman State University was initially a private teacher training school, and SUNY Geneseo also began as a normal school. The University of Minnesota Morris in its earliest incarnation was a boarding high school for American Indians operated by the Sisters of Mercy, an order of nuns. Likewise, Fort Lewis began as a federal institution teaching Native Americans in an abandoned military fort in Hesperus, CO. The University of Mary Washington

started out as the State Normal and Industrial School for Women, and Keene State College was another normal institution. UNC Asheville was initially a county-run public junior college which won designation as the State's public liberal arts college through a strenuous lobbying effort by the Chancellor, aimed at legislators and the UNC Board of Governors. New College was a private college, affiliated with the Board of Home Missions of the United Church of Christ, which became public in 1975. Evergreen was a state school from the beginning, as was Ramapo. So, some of today's state related public liberal arts colleges have been private, some religiously affiliated, some have been municipal, some county sponsored, and some federal.

From the beginning, and increasingly, the "public" character of the public liberal arts colleges has betokened much more than a primary funding source. These institutions see themselves as serving their "publics" in ways which are important to them, and different than private liberal arts colleges. While the nation's top private liberal arts colleges seek, and brag about having achieved, a national student body, COPLAC institutions, while certainly desiring geographic diversity, have always served a more local student population – almost always predominantly from within the State of their locale, and often focusing upon particular regions of their states. They often have academic programs which focus on local matters – e.g., Appalachian literature and culture; Great Plains Native American history and language; Pacific Northwest marine ecology; and the like.

While hardly distinctive, it is worth noting that all the COPLAC institutions by 1992 were **co-educational**, and all of them were predominantly **undergraduate**, although many of them had small opportunities for post-baccalaureate study.

All the original COPLAC schools saw themselves as focusing upon the "**liberal arts.**" That phrase, though, also becomes a bit more murky when one drills down to examine the actual curriculum of the members of the group. Some were "pure" liberal arts colleges, with no hint of "practical" or vocational training. Most, though, included occupationally oriented programs like marketing or business administration or atmospheric sciences or elementary education, which liberal arts purists often decried as drifting from the rather limited range of fields traditionally thought of as comprising liberal learning – e.g., philosophy, physics, psychology, and the like.

In many cases, these institutions saw such programs as imbued with a "liberal arts" focus. Thus, for example, one might not just learn the facts of a discipline, but also step back and seek to understand its methodology of truth seeking; its relationship to other disciplines near and far; an emphasis on a pedagogy of exploration and discussion, not just fact or skill transmission, etc. An institution can offer courses in engineering, for example, in which questions involving philosophy, social responsibility, and aesthetics are raised.

Even less susceptible to easy definition, all the original COPLAC institutions saw themselves as "**small.**" But what is "small?" Smaller than the state University flagship institution? Smaller than most public institutions? One college's "small" might be another's "enormous!" Even today, the current COPLAC membership includes institutions with over 8000 students, and with fewer than 800. (And in 2009, the institution which was historically the largest in the group, the College of Charleston, which currently has over 11,000 students, withdrew.) The current median size of COPLAC member institutions is a bit over 4,000. Clearer than any definitive numerical barrier,

is a set of values which these colleges and universities together cherish, which they think are linked to “small” size. These include accessible and teaching/advising focused faculty; at least some small, seminar-style classes for undergraduates; an effort to build a community of coherence involving students, faculty and staff; the opportunity for students to participate in a relatively wide range of curricular and extra-curricular activities (e.g., a physics major can be in the orchestra and play on the volleyball team); and a pleasant and unified campus where most students can walk from class to class, from dorm to gym.

Another defining characteristic in COPLAC’s foundational days was **selectivity** in Admissions. Here again, a careful look at the operational definitions of “selective admissions” reveals significant variation from institution to institution. Some of the original members, especially those who sought the “public ivy” denomination aspired to admitting students who would be competitive at the nation’s top liberal arts colleges and research universities. Others had more modest aspirations. To those latter schools “selective” was taken a bit more literally, and understood to mean “not open admissions” or not even virtually open recruitment. Undergirding this characteristic, I believe, is and was the conviction that these schools are not “fall back” choices for students, and that the liberal arts education they provide will be most rewarding to students of above average promise and/or motivation.

If we seek to identify the core values which brought this set of colleges and universities together to create a new consortium, it seems to me that there are actually three layers of meaning:

1. The first, and most obvious of those layers, is what might be called the “viewbook” or “website” level. That consists of some very lofty words, of nearly universal attraction, and relatively loosely defined meaning. Thus, COPLAC schools were all “public, undergraduate, co-educational, small selective, liberal arts” institutions. There is, of course, nothing wrong about using these words, but one does not have to look very long or hard to discover that many institutions far removed from the COPLAC genre also use them profusely. Thus, just as one example, a flagship campus of over 52,000 students, in a system which also includes a COPLAC school of 1900 students, proclaims that there one will find “a close-knit community of students who share your interests.” Skepticism would not be unjustified about describing a student body of 52,000 as “close knit!”
2. One level beneath these broad general claims is what I’ve tried to outline in the paragraphs above, a kind of deconstruction of those statements of value. It turns out that, if examined more closely, “public,” “small,” “selective,” and “liberal arts” mean today, and meant in 1992, very different things to different institutions. One school’s “small” is another’s “big,” one’s “liberal arts” might include subject matter areas which would be decried elsewhere as professional studies or even “vocationalism.”
3. But beyond this somewhat cynical interpretation of COPLAC’s founding core values is, in my opinion, a clear, ambitious, and rather inspiring sense of what some institutions of higher education can be at the end of the twentieth-century, and the beginning of the twenty-first. They can be places that serve and study their regions, their homes, the states and families which support them. They can be schools which help students learn how to

learn, how to think critically, how to become their own best lifelong teachers. Colleges and universities can at least aspire to be places where women and men – professors, students, staff – form a learning community which is characterized by humane interactions and genuine interpersonal communication. And they can be places where young women and men who are eager to learn and grow, and who have the drive and the ability to do so, can nourish that yearning in the company of others who share that quest.

## 2. Adolescence – 1992-2002

In 1992 COPLAC was incorporated as a not-for-profit entity in the State of Minnesota (through the leadership of Chancellor David Johnson at the University of Minnesota Morris). At the same time, the group's housekeeping business – sending invoices, processing correspondence, notification of meetings, preparing simple financial reports, and the like – was largely done through the office of the Chancellor of The University of North Carolina Asheville, by Tom Byers, Assistant to the Chancellor there. The annual meetings were generally planned by the Chancellor/President of the host institution, who was also recognized as the President of COPLAC. In 1992, the initial formal membership of the newly incorporated organization consisted of:

1. UNC Asheville
2. Ramapo College
3. The University of Maine Farmington
4. Mary Washington College
5. The College of Charleston
6. The University of Minnesota Morris
7. Keene State College
8. Northeast Missouri / Truman State University
9. The Evergreen State College
10. New College of the University of South Florida

This somewhat curious arrangement of divided corporate responsibilities reflects with some accuracy the character of COPLAC during this decade: the organization functioned to the satisfaction of most of its members, but in a rather informal and somewhat anecdotal fashion: several of its policies and practices were simply passed on orally as new members, or new institutional representatives, joined the group. Many of the organization's practices were not formalized into a written constitution or bylaws, or, indeed, written form anywhere. If they were discussed at a COPLAC meeting, those practices may – or may not – have appeared in the minutes thereof. These must have been somewhat trying years for new chief executives joining the organization trying to figure out how COPLAC worked! On the other hand, the consortium was unhindered by a set of constricting rules as it grew and created a niche for itself.

Among the organization's practices, later incorporated into formal documentation, were these:

1. The "official" representative to COPLAC – including eligibility to serve as a voting member of the Board of Directors and as officers of the organization – would be the chief executive of the member institutions, or a person appointed by the Chancellor/President. Usually, the chief executive herself or himself played this role, but in some cases that individual did not show much interest in the doings of the consortium, and the Provost or a dean served instead. Indeed, in some cases the Provost of a member institution became a senior leader of the organization – e.g., Phil Hall at the University of Mary Washington, Gordon Leverage at Keene State College, or Sam Hines at the College of Charleston.
2. As noted earlier, at the annual summer meeting, there would be an effort to select an institution for the meeting two years in the future, with the assumption that the institution so selected would be the home institution of the "President-elect" of the organization. Thus, at each summer meeting, the beginnings of the plans for the next meeting would be discussed, and the location/host for the meeting-after-next would be selected.
3. A careful procedure for selecting new members had evolved over the years since COPLAC was founded, and it became institutionalized during this decade. A Membership Committee had been created, and if an institution contacted the organization seeking information about membership, or wishing to join, its application would be processed by that group. (Sometimes, the Membership Committee was proactive, and would contact what it believed to be likely prospects for joining the consortium.) If the initial paperwork looked promising, the Membership Committee would invite the institution to submit a formal application, responding to a set series of queries. At some early point in the process, a small preliminary visiting team, or individual, might visit the campus to gain some first-hand familiarity with it, to respond to queries regarding COPLAC, and offer advice regarding the application process. If that application still suggested a strong case for membership, a more formal team, usually two persons, would visit the prospective institution, and speak to a wide variety of faculty, administrative leaders and staff (and occasionally students). That team's recommendation plus the institution's formal application would be presented at the next business meeting of COPLAC, carefully discussed, and a vote taken on membership.

During this period, using the above process, the following institutions achieved membership:

1. SUNY Geneseo (1994; Geneseo, NY)
2. The University of Montevallo (1995; Montevallo, AL)
3. Fort Lewis College (1995; Durango, CO)
4. Henderson State University (1998; Arkadelphia, AR)
5. Sonoma State University (1999; Rohnert Park, CA)
6. Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts (1999; North Adams, MA)

7. Georgia College (2001; Milledgeville, GA)
8. The University of Wisconsin – Superior (2001; Superior, WI)

Additionally, in 1998, St. Mary's College of Maryland, which had been involved in the creation of COPLAC, but had withdrawn from membership, rejoined the group. A handful of institutions which had indicated some interest in joining the group were not accepted for membership, or withdrew from the application process. Too, between 1992 and 1999, New College had enjoyed a somewhat tenuous membership status within COPLAC, in part because of its somewhat tenuous status as a unit of the University of South Florida (in which case, it would not be eligible to belong) and its original (and current) status as a free-standing independent institution in its own right.

The addition of these members nearly doubled the size of COPLAC.

At the beginning of this period, in the early 1990s there was some muted debate within COPLAC between those campus leaders who wished the organization to pursue and strengthen the “public ivy” image of highly selective undergraduate liberal arts colleges, and those who were eager to expand the membership, perhaps seeking a member institution in every (or nearly every) state. To the former the selectivity of the COPLAC schools was a core and defining characteristic; to the latter, growth would promote visibility and fiscal stability. Although this issue never reached a boiling point of confrontation or hostility, it was the “elephant in the room” as several of the applications for membership were accepted (and several rejected). By the end of the decade, the issue had been pretty much decided in favor of the expansionist position. “Selectivity” continued to be a desired, even required, characteristic, but less and less at the Ivy League level.

As that debate subsided, another, related one emerged: should institutions join COPLAC when they had substantially achieved the status of small rigorous public undergraduate liberal arts colleges...or should they be admitted if they indicated they wished to move in that direction? Or, as a third alternative, should they be invited into the circle of COPLAC if they aspired to the status of other members, and had taken significant steps in that direction, but were not there yet. The second of these alternatives was rejected: colleges and universities which aspired to liberal arts status, but had not actually moved significantly to achieve that status, were invited to continue down that path, and to reapply when substantial progress had been made. Some institutions which had taken serious steps in the direction of the COPLAC model, and which showed clear indications that they intended to continue in that direction, were admitted. Obviously, this was – and is – a judgment made through a discussion and vote of the members, and, to some small extent, as new members, and new chief executives, were added to the pool of those voting on membership, the standards and definitions have never been completely rigid, but tend to be weighed and mulled perennially with occasional slight shifts of emphasis. That said, it is clear that, since the founding of COPLAC, new members have been invited to join on the basis more of performance than promise.

Between 1992 and 2002, COPLAC made an effort to bring greater participation from campus constituencies beyond the senior leadership into an active role in the organization. Initially, this

involved inviting different groups of faculty and administrators to attend the annual summer meeting. (See Appendix 2). Thus, for example, in 1997, at the University of Maine at Farmington, member institutions were invited to bring their admissions directors/deans to the meeting to share with each other and with the group as a whole, their expertise and common challenges and solutions. The following year, in 1998, taking advantage of Fort Lewis College's location near Mesa Verde National Park, anthropologists, especially those working in the area of Native American studies, were invited, and travelled to the National Park for a full day of investigation and discussion. Beginning in 2005, these informal opportunities for faculty participation were separated from the annual meeting, into a series of COPLAC Faculty Institutes, usually held in the early summer, and hosted by the University of North Carolina Asheville and then Dean of Humanities William Spellman (See Appendix 3).

In 1997, the first COPLAC listserv came on-line. Not surprisingly, this enterprise has evolved dramatically over the years, and there are now multiple listservs, responding to particular subgroups of the organization and special interests.

As the decade (and the millennium!) reached its end there was a growing sense that COPLAC needed to take a next step in formalizing its organizational status. At the June, 2001 meeting, Les Purce, President at The Evergreen State College, was selected as COPLAC President for the following year. Dr. Purce understood that part of his mandate was to move the organization to "getting organized." He wrote in his annual report:

Organizations reach a stage in their development when, in order to thrive, they have to take a large step, expand their activities, and begin to achieve their promise....COPLAC wants to champion public liberal arts, wants to join its separate entities to create an organization that can speak to the issues, provide broadening opportunities for its students and faculty, and be a voice for liberal arts during trying financial times. Many ideas have been expressed, but without centralized and concentrated leadership, achieving COPLAC's promise has been difficult.

(Report to COPLAC, June 21-24, 2002).

Working with the Executive Committee, and then with the formal approval of the membership, a number of steps were taken:

- Dr. Susan Finkel at The Evergreen State College was hired as the quarter-time Executive Secretary, later Executive Director, of COPLAC, giving the organization its first paid staff. COPLAC's files were organized and moved to The Evergreen State College.
- Dues were increased from \$2500 to \$3000 per member.
- The membership criteria were altered to permit more than one member institution per state, under certain conditions such as approval by the other institution(s) within that state.
- President Purce proposed and the membership approved a set of formal Bylaws. The Bylaws had first been drafted in 1998. Those Bylaws were subsequently slightly modified and approved by the Board of Directors in 2008.

One way to chart the development of the organization is that it moved from a group of characters and personalities to an active, functioning council/group which is recognized as a sector of higher education and worthy of the recognition of major foundations and higher education organizations. It would probably be accurate to observe that it was at this point, at the start of the new millennium, that COPLAC ceased being an informal community of colleges and their presidents, held together largely by personal connections and a shared sense of mission, and became instead more of a professional higher education association. A few of the older members had some regrets about this shift, but probably all believed it to be necessary if the organization was to move ahead with new members and new chancellors, presidents and provosts.

### Getting Organized – 2002-2009

For most of the first decade of the twenty-first century, COPLAC maintained its headquarters at The Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington, where its part-time Executive Director, Dr. Susan Finkel, had her office. This was a period in which the consortium took on many of the characteristics of other small national higher education organizations. A number of relatively small, but cumulatively significant policies were put in place during these years.

The prior understanding and guideline for membership was modified to permit more than one institution from any given state to apply for membership, if another member as of 2002 from that state was willing.

In 2005 the first of the summer institutes at Asheville, disconnected from the COPLAC summer meeting, was held. It focused upon faculty from the members' English departments.

A formal three-year rolling plan for choosing annual meeting sites was adopted. Colleges which have not previously hosted a summer meeting will be given preference; geographical variety will be a factor in selection; potential host institutions will have to designate an individual to coordinate meeting plans and details.

For many campus leaders, the idea of student and faculty exchanges between COPLAC schools has been an attractive one. While there have been a few faculty who have spent time at a COPLAC campus other than their own, this program has never developed a widespread enthusiasm among faculty members, nor much momentum. The student exchange possibility has not materialized. In 2007, the membership allocated a small grant to try to advance such exchanges, but they continue to be an underutilized possibility.

Seven new members were added to the COPLAC rolls during this period:

1. Southern Oregon University (Ashland, OR)
2. Eastern Connecticut State University (Willimantic, CT)
3. University of Science and Arts of Oklahoma (Chickasha, OK)
4. University of Virginia's College at Wise (Wise, VA)
5. Midwestern State University (Wichita Falls, TX)

6. University of Alberta-Augustana (Camrose, Alberta)
7. Shepherd University (Shepherdstown, WV)

These additions brought the number of COPLAC members to 26 (a year later, the College of Charleston withdrew, taking the membership down to 25). The Membership Committee had set as a goal adding 2-3 new members per year, with the goal ultimately of having at least one COPLAC college in each state. While the organization has continued to expand those membership aspirations remain quite a way off.

When the University of Alberta-Augustana expressed interest, and made an application for membership, there was discussion of whether or not COPLAC should grow outside the borders of the US. The decision reached was, obviously, a positive one. This institution, like several others in the organization, began as a private, denominational school, and was incorporated into the provincial higher education system in 2004.

### 3. Maturity

As the decade drew to a close, the leaders of COPLAC campuses concluded that the organization had reached a point where a full-time director and a more permanent office would be desirable and possible. A national search was held, and Dr. William Spellman, who was completing his term as Dean of Humanities at The University of North Carolina Asheville was selected. Dr. Spellman had been very active in a number of COPLAC initiatives in previous years, perhaps most notably in the faculty institutes. The consortium office was moved to Asheville, and a part-time secretarial assistant was hired. The assistant position became a full-time program associate in 2010 after the organization secured its first external grant.

In June of 2008, just prior to the move to Asheville and as preparation for it, the Board of Directors drafted a Strategic Plan, suggesting four important areas for the organization to stress and strengthen. Dr. Spellman has, in the intervening six years, framed much of his work in the context of those strategic directions. They are:

1. COPLAC will advance understanding of the value and purpose of the collective missions of COPLAC institutions, using a well-orchestrated strategy of advocacy and communication.
2. COPLAC will build on its successful networking capacity to create a stronger community of public liberal arts faculty and staff through programs within and beyond disciplinary boundaries.
3. COPLAC will develop a highly sophisticated interactive web presence that provides a portal for COPLAC member institutions, their faculty and staff to communicate, network, and plan together.

4. COPLAC will strengthen its organization – both staff and volunteer – to build on current success and more appropriately align with its aspirations.

In the area of communications and advocacy, raising the visibility and credibility of the consortium, several significant articles have been placed in important national educational venues. These publications have mostly, but not exclusively, been authored by Dr. Spellman. They have appeared in AAC&U's *Liberal Education*, the *CUR Quarterly*, *Inside HigherEd*, and the *Huffington Post*.

In 2014, Drs. Spellman and Roger Epp (The University of Alberta, Edmonton) edited a volume entitled *Roads Taken* (Kirksville Missouri, Truman State University Press). The book is subtitled: "The Professorial Life, Scholarship in Place, and the Public Good." It features 14 chapters, all authored by faculty members from COPLAC institutions (and an "Afterword" by Joseph Urgo, former President of St. Mary's College of Maryland). In one form or another, each chapter focuses upon the challenges and rewards of a professorial career at a small public liberal arts college. Clearly the "rewards" of such careers take primacy in most of the essays, but overall the book pulls no punches in its various descriptions of the problems faced by COPLAC teachers – relative professional isolation, less time for conventional academic scholarly productivity, and the like.

A number of COPLAC initiatives have focused on the area of undergraduate research. Beginning in 2009, COPLAC began sponsoring regional conferences showcasing undergraduate research. Those in the Northeast and Southeast regions have proven successful, and are now offered on a continuing basis. In a related development, COPLAC applied for, and received, a grant from CUR (the Conference on Undergraduate Research) in 2010 which brought 100 faculty from the "STEM" disciplines together to discuss opportunities for cooperation and synergy. A journal of undergraduate research, *Metamorphosis*, has been published by COPLAC since 2009, featuring essays by students selected by faculty committees on the various campuses. Between 2009 and 2014, the journal published 170 research papers from 23 campuses.

COPLAC was able to leverage the successful CUR grant to secure additional funding from the Teagle Foundation. In 2012 Teagle awarded COPLAC a \$150,000 grant to work on distance mentoring of undergraduate research: that is, to make it possible for a student at a COPLAC college in the Midwest to undertake a project, for which an ideal mentor was teaching at a different college on the East Coast. A larger grant from the same source – over \$270,000 for a three year period – moves in the same direction, but with a particular focus on Native American studies. The grant will enable a student to take a course on his/her home campus, taught by an expert in Native American studies from another campus, with an on-site mentor from the student's home institution. Finally, in the area of undergraduate research, COPLAC became a partner in the AAC&U LEAP program, contributing accounts of undergraduate research, particularly in the area of civic engagement, to this national initiative.

COPLAC has increased its visibility on the national higher education scene by sponsoring two panel sessions at meetings of the AAC&U, including every conference from 2009 to 2014. These have covered a variety of topics, and have usually been reasonably well attended.

Continuously, since the organization's creation, there has been an emphasis upon increasing the visibility of the COPLAC institutions, and of COPLAC itself, and of the public liberal arts segment of the American higher education community as a whole. Logically, this has led, three times, to the consortium hiring the services of public relations firms, specializing in higher education. Although in some cases, these connections have yielded some positive results, overall, they have not accomplished all the membership wished. The most recent effort in 2013, after a promising beginning, quickly proved unproductive, and the relationship was terminated. There is more work to be done in this area.

COPLAC has created student and faculty awards to honor former leaders of the organization, David Prior and Charles Dunn. The Prior award recognizes a senior-level undergraduate whose academic career and future goals have been shaped by the transformative power of the liberal arts, while the Dunn award recognizes a faculty member whose commitment to student success goes above and beyond the classroom and office, the traditional roles of teacher and academic advisor.

In keeping with the strategic directions, Dr. Spellman and the Board have worked to increase the level and quality of voluntary contributions to the consortium. There are several standing committees which meet regularly and report to the membership, as well as some *ad hoc* groups (e.g., the Teagle Grant Steering Committee) which undertake particular tasks then rotate out of existence.

Three institutions have been added to the roster of COPLAC colleges during this period:

University of Illinois – Springfield (Springfield, IL)

Southern Utah University (Cedar City, UT)

University of South Carolina Aiken (Aiken, SC)

The addition of USC Aiken brings the total number of current COPLAC institutions to 28. At the current dues level of \$9500.00 per year, COPLAC, while hardly wealthy, has a budget which seems comfortably above the poverty level.

At the conclusion of the 2013 academic year I surveyed the presidents/chancellors of all the COPLAC campuses, asking a few simple questions about their perceptions of the organization, their suggestions, concerns, and the like. Fourteen of the CEO's, just over 50%, responded. These included individuals who were quite new to the organization and others who had been with it since its earliest days. In general their responses were warmly, but moderately, positive.

I asked first *“I assume your campus' character as a public liberal arts college is an important part of your identity. How important do you think COPLAC is to creating and communicating that image?”* Several of the CEO's responded that COPLAC was “very important.” Four used those particular words. Others offered comments like “extremely important,” “becoming more

important” or “almost critical.” One chancellor observed “Not very important for prospective students. Quite important for faculty and staff and for prospective faculty and staff.” Of the respondents, only one was negative, affirming that the COPLAC affiliation was “not very” important.

A second query was “*What are a few of the most beneficial programs that COPLAC has promoted for you and your college?*” Several presidents mentioned one or another of the initiatives regarding undergraduate research. Others focused on faculty development. I suspect that a similar question asked when COPLAC was much younger might have elicited more responses focusing on presidents and provosts, and fewer on students and faculty.

I then asked “*What might you like to see added or strengthened? Or changed?*” This question provoked a variety of responses. One CEO would like to see “a clearer understanding of the glue that holds these institutions together.” Another laments the inability of COPLAC to successfully launch a program of faculty exchanges. One respondent would like to see more course sharing. Some commented on visibility issues – “more strategic publicity efforts,” “a stronger and more coherent marketing plan,” “enhanced national image and recognition of COPLAC,” and “a focus on marketing.” One president would like to see an increased emphasis on the role of the liberal arts in a STEM preoccupied world. Another would like to see more data on student success after graduation.

My fourth question was “*When did you first hear about COPLAC, and what did you hear?*” Some of the presidents/chancellors discovered COPLAC as their interest in liberal arts colleges developed, often as faculty members. In a few cases, it was only when arriving to lead a COPLAC campus that the respondent became aware of the organization. Two current CEO’s mentioned that they were introduced to COPLAC by leaders of the organization: Bob Scott and David Prior.

Next, I asked the current COPLAC Chief Executives “*Is there anything in the lore of your institution about moving towards being a public liberal arts institution, or joining COPLAC which might be of interest?*” One reply noted that there was considerable “lore” regarding the effort to secure the title of the State’s liberal arts and sciences university. A second respondent also focused upon the process of having the institution gain “official” recognition by the state Commissioner of Higher Education, and the State’s legislature. And a third observed that his institution was founded to be his State’s public liberal arts college. One individual observed that becoming a COPLAC president was a major goal when searching for a new position. And one president recalls that many on campus felt it was not possible to be both “public” and “liberal arts.” Several individuals paid homage to their predecessor CEO’s efforts to make their institutions public liberal arts colleges.

I concluded this unscientific and brief survey with the open-ended question “*Anything else you would care to tell me?*” Some of the presidents expressed appreciation for the task of compiling this history; several invited me to contact them if I had additional queries. One remarked that COPLAC had nurtured several long-term friendships among the presidents. Two of the respondents noted that membership in the consortium was an important step in raising the repute of their institutions and giving them a clearer brand identity.

The senior administrators of the COPLAC campuses seem convinced that COPLAC is doing a good job, and that membership is valuable for them, both personally and institutionally. If there is any dissatisfaction, it lies in the frustration that a handful of potentially valuable programs, which have been contemplated over the years, have never reached fruition. These might include student exchanges, shared international experiences, and faculty exchanges. Other relatively small consortia have had success with some of these endeavors (e.g., the Great Lakes Colleges Association or the Associated Colleges of the Midwest). But those private college consortia have been able to devote resources to these programs that are probably not easily available at small public institutions (e.g., faculty released time on each campus to coordinate the international study options). COPLAC remains a largely voluntary organization of presidents and provosts, and it is probably not realistic to expect those senior administrators to devote significant energy to the day-to-day operations of, say, a student exchange program across the campuses.

For nearly three decades, the Council of Public Liberal Arts Colleges has slowly but steadily grown, both in size and ambition. It has served its member campuses well, and has helped to make the case for public liberal arts colleges within the American higher education community. From its very informal and modest origins, it has become a well-organized, useful, and effective organization of which its members are, and should be, proud.

#### 4. Addendum – 2014 - 2017

Mansfield University of Pennsylvania joined the consortium in January 2015, followed by Vermont's Johnson State College in June 2016. With 30 campuses now representing 28 States and one Canadian Province, Board members began to revisit the issue of growth and institutional identity. Surveys and Board conversations suggested that some campus leaders were in favor of continued growth through the admission of "aspirational" campuses that were working towards COPLAC criteria, while other leaders emphasized the importance of strict compliance with membership criteria prior to admission.

In December 2015, COPLAC was awarded its first major grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. Building on the success of an earlier multi-campus digital liberal arts seminar funded by the Teagle Foundation, the three-year, \$540,000 Mellon grant was designed to bring to scale a range of team-taught seminars in the Humanities. In June 2016 approximately 70 faculty members, instructional technologists, and university archivists gathered at UNC Asheville to develop new topical seminars. Follow-up training sessions for the two-person faculty teams took place on the campus of the University of Mary Washington, and the first seminars were launched in Spring 2017. Sixteen campuses were represented in the project, and students from every member institution were invited to apply for admission to one of the distance seminars.

COPLAC continued its partnership with AAC&U, introducing for the first time in 2014 faculty and student panel presentations at their annual meeting, while still offering presidential level panel sessions. The model of the COPLAC Annual Meeting in June evolved as working sessions for professional groups were added to the traditional panel presentations on the conference theme. Eastern Connecticut State University hosted in June 2015 with a focus on place-based and technology-enhanced learning, and Southern Utah University hosted in June 2016 around a theme of outdoor and experiential education. In June 2017, Mansfield University of Pennsylvania welcomed Institutional Research Officers and Communications Officers to the Annual Meeting to assist with the implementation of a new Strategic Plan.

During the 2016-2017 academic year an *ad hoc* subcommittee of the Board was charged with the development of a new Strategic Plan for COPLAC. A survey of Board members, followed by a January presentation to the Board in San Francisco and individual phone conversations with member presidents/chancellors during Spring semester 2017, established a new set of priorities for the organization. Final discussion and edits took place at the June 2017 Board meeting, and the Plan was adopted unanimously.

In Fall 2016, following Bill Spellman's announcement that he would retire the following July, the Board established a search committee to recruit candidates for the position of Executive Director. With Board approval, the search committee members conducted an "internal" search where each member campus was invited to identify and nominate qualified candidates for the position. After an extensive process involving phone and on-site interviews, Dr. Cole Woodcox, Professor of English at Truman State University, was appointed the new Executive Director of COPLAC and began in that role 1 June, 2017.

## A Note on the Text, by Sam Schuman, 2014

Since this historical sketch is far from a scholarly monograph, I have eschewed footnotes, bibliography, and other formal research apparatuses. It is worthwhile, however, to note the major sources of the material in the preceding pages.

There have been two earlier, shorter, surveys of the history of COPLAC. A very brief, one page history was compiled by Susan Finkel in 2006. This was part of a “welcome to COPLAC” package she prepared for new members. It is accurate and helpful, but does not go into any detail. A longer discussion of the origins of the consortium was written by Bettina Blake, and presented at the summer 1996 meeting. Dr. Blake’s piece included more detail than Dr. Finkel’s, but it focuses primarily on the foundational period.

Fortunately, I was able to consult the records of COPLAC stored in the group’s files, especially minutes of all the annual meetings.

I have interviewed, in person, by phone, e-mail or in writing a few of the key players in the COPLAC story, past and present. Among those who have contributed in this direct fashion are David W. Brown, Bettina Blake, Tom Byers, Robert Scott, Anne Ponder, David Johnson, Les Purce and William Spellman.

As noted above, I surveyed all the current presidents/chancellors of the COPLAC colleges, and I am grateful for the thoughtful responses of over half of them.

Claire Bailey, Program Associate in the COPLAC office in Asheville, has been helpful beyond the call of duty.

I was a reasonably active and attentive member of COPLAC, from my positions at the University of North Carolina Asheville and the University of Minnesota, Morris from 1991 until 2007. Some of the material covering that decade-and-a-half is based on my personal experience and memory.

Trying to piece together even a short and informal historical summary, covering a relatively short period, is not without its challenges. Not all the founders of COPLAC have identical memories of its earliest days, for example. Written documents such as minutes of business meetings and similar reports sometimes differ on exact details. I have tried to follow the strongest evidence, and recognize where some minor ambiguity may exist. It is my hope that the next historian of COPLAC, another twenty-five years from now, will find these pages accurate, thorough, and helpful.

## Appendix 1: COPLAC Annual Summer Meetings

1988	UNC Asheville - initial convening to form the consortium
1989	no meeting
1990	Ramapo College of New Jersey
1991	The Evergreen State College
1992	University of Minnesota Morris
1993	Keene State College
1994	College of Charleston
1995	Truman State University (at the time Northeast Missouri State)
1996	University of Mary Washington
1997	University of Maine Farmington
1998	Fort Lewis College
1999	SUNY Geneseo
2000	Henderson State University
2001	The Evergreen State College
2002	Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts
2003	Ramapo College of New Jersey
2004	College of Charleston
2005	University of Montevallo
2006	Georgia College
2007	University of Wisconsin Superior
2008	Southern Oregon University
2009	Keene State College
2010	UNC Asheville
2011	University of Alberta-Augustana
2012	University of Virginia's College at Wise
2013	Shepherd University
2014	Fort Lewis College
2015	Eastern Connecticut State University
2016	Southern Utah University
2017	Mansfield University of Pennsylvania

## Appendix 2: Summer Faculty Institutes:

2005	English
2006	Environmental Studies
2007	Psychology
2008	Biology
2009	History
2010	Economics
2011	STEM Fields (100 faculty, funded by CUR)
2012	Math
2013	Contributors to <i>Roads Taken</i>
2014	Special focus on Civic Engagement (Board-designated project for 2014-15)

2015	Communication and Marketing professional staff
2016	Convening of the Mellon-funded COPLAC Digital project (faculty, special collections librarians, and instructional technologists)
2017	Art and Art History

### **Appendix 3: Annual Meeting Professional Groups:**

2003	no group at Ramapo
2004	Library Directors at College of Charleston
2005	no group at Montevallo
2006	Development/Advancement Officers at Georgia College
2007	no group at UW-Superior
2008	Facilities Management Directors at Southern Oregon
2009	Admissions Officers at Keene
2010	Student Affairs at Asheville
2011	no group at Augustana/U of Alberta
2012	Undergraduate Research directors/leaders at UVa-Wise
2013	IR professionals at Shepherd
2014	no group at Fort Lewis (we have Native American Studies Directors to implement the Teagle grant)
2015	Those involved with the Hybrid Studies Teagle grant at Eastern Connecticut
2016	no group at Southern Utah
2017	Institutional Research officers and Communication professionals at Mansfield

### **Membership Criteria and Procedures**

See the COPLAC website at <http://coplac.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/membership-information.pdf>

### **COPLAC Presidents (since 1997)**

1997-1999	Theo Kalikow, University of Maine Farmington
1999-2000	Chris Dahl, SUNY Geneseo
2000-2001	Charles Dunn, Henderson State University
2001-2003	Les Purce, The Evergreen State College
2003-2005	Sam Hines, College of Charleston
2005-2007	Barbara Dixon, Truman State University
2007-2009	Mary Grant, Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts
2009-2011	Dorothy Leland, Georgia College
2011-2012	David Prior, University of Virginia's College at Wise
2012-2014	Allen Berger, University of Alberta, Augustana Campus
2014-2016	Suzanne Shipley, Shepherd University/Midwestern State Univ.
2016-2018	Troy Paino, University of Mary Washington

Established in 1987, the Council of Public Liberal Arts Colleges (COPLAC) is dedicated to the advancement of high-quality, liberal arts education in a public college setting. COPLAC represents a distinguished sector in higher education consisting of 30 colleges and universities in 28 states and one Canadian province. Our mission is to advance the aims of our member institutions and drive awareness of the value of a public liberal arts education in a student-centered, residential environment.

