

UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND, BALTIMORE COUNTY:

## UMBC INTERDISCIPLINARY COLAB

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### PROGRAM SUMMARY

UMBC Interdisciplinary CoLab brings together interdisciplinary teams of undergraduate students to conduct humanities-based research, work professionally on “real-world” projects, tell compelling stories and amplify community voices. A hallmark of CoLab is its focus on public-facing final projects that support on- and off-campus community partners. Since the program launched in 2018, CoLab students have engaged with archived texts and images to develop websites, built podcasts based on oral history interviews and worked with communities on documentary films.

CoLab’s innovative project-based curriculum combines instruction in interdisciplinary humanities research methods and effective collaboration practices with tools for metacognitive reflection in an immersive 6-week paid summer internship. The CoLab experience is structured differently from other course-based group projects in which students work together to master the same materials and skills within a shared disciplinary framework across a semester. In CoLab, students from different disciplines apply to specific projects and spend 30 hours a week together conducting primary research and creating public-facing research artifacts.

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**STUDENT LEARNING GOALS:** 1) To work in interdisciplinary teams to create narrative-based research “products” in multiple modalities, engaging multiple audiences and addressing multiple social challenges; 2) to work effectively in interdisciplinary teams by integrating inclusive excellence best practices with narrative-based research strategies and effective collaboration, including articulating roles, integrating diverse viewpoints, motivating and supporting team members, synthesizing contributions, sharing constructive feedback, fulfilling roles and responsibilities, and negotiating, managing and resolving conflicts; and 3) to demonstrate increasing confidence in working across disciplinary boundaries to

### QUICK FACTS

Year founded: **2018**

Project source: **Faculty**

Duration: **6 weeks**

Students per year: **15-21**

Interdisciplinary: **Yes**

Vertical integration: **No**

conduct original research, work effectively with peers and leaders to create research artifacts, and communicate with multiple audiences.

To achieve these goals, project teams are intentionally composed so that the three student members draw on complementary disciplinary backgrounds and skillsets. Aided by CoLab's purposeful practices of collaboration and self-reflection, students develop effective collaboration methods and come to realize the wealth of what they can bring to a project and to value the contributions made by others. They also gain confidence in and appreciation of group work. The [five-year assessment](#) conducted in 2022 demonstrated that CoLab's unique collaborative interdisciplinary format is a high-impact practice for student learning in the areas of humanities research, interdisciplinary collaboration and structured self-reflection. Humanities students learn that their unique habits of mind have tremendous "real-world" relevance, while non-humanities majors come to appreciate the value of humanistic approaches for ethical engagement with colleagues and communities. Students report that CoLab significantly boosts their confidence in themselves and in teamwork. For instance, students report:

*"Taking an idea all the way from conception to final product was rewarding in ways I hadn't anticipated."*

*"I feel like I can take on more ambitious projects and be able to trust more in my fellow collaborators, even if they come from different backgrounds than myself."*

*"I feel more confident that I can excel in whatever endeavor I take on, and I thank the CoLab team for creating an environment in which I was able to grow in this manner."*

In sum, it is a group project that students find meaningful and fulfilling, making it a highly sought-after learning experience. CoLab faculty who serve as project leaders consistently say it "is what teaching should be." Community partners praise the students' professionalism and say the program has a valuable impact for their organizations. CoLab students also earn a University System of Maryland (USM) [Digital Badge in Interdisciplinary Collaboration](#), which validates the acquisition of the skills necessary to be a successful contributor to professional teams. CoLab has been cited as an innovative model for humanities education by the [National Humanities Alliance](#) and the [American Council of Learned Societies](#).

## RESOURCES AND ADMINISTRATIVE MODEL

### COLLABORATION AT ALL LEVELS

CoLab is a collaboration of the provost's office, [the Dresher Center for the Humanities](#) and the [Division of Professional Studies](#). The provost's office provides core funding of \$142,000 and the Dresher Center provides administrative support for faculty salaries, student stipends and project expenditures. The Division of Professional Studies manages marketing and student

applications and provides full tuition scholarships to CoLab students. This collaboration has evolved over time and was formalized in an MOU in 2021.

The day-to-day operations are managed by a three-member faculty leadership team that recruits and selects projects and project leaders and coordinates the student selection process. These leaders' work with the program is carried out in addition to their primary faculty roles. CoLab project ideas are solicited among faculty and staff throughout the academic year with a formal application and selection process conducted during the fall semester. Project leaders are identified and recruited as part of the project proposal development and review process. Often faculty and staff members already working on a research project or with community partners opt to lead the projects. In other cases, the CoLab leadership team identifies and recruits individuals with the requisite skills to lead projects. Students apply to specific projects after seeing descriptions of project activities and goals, as well as necessary skills. In their applications, students write a short essay outlining the interests and skills they would bring

to the projects. Students are encouraged to apply for all projects of interest to them. Student teams are jointly selected by project leaders and the leadership team, ensuring that they reflect diversity with respect to majors and demographic backgrounds.

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The leadership team also prepares and delivers the core curriculum and conducts annual program assessments. Interdisciplinary, collaborative and metacognitive skills are at the core of the CoLab curriculum. In the week before CoLab begins, students are asked to write a short essay outlining their goals for the summer experience. This assignment prepares them to learn from the first week of workshops on interdisciplinary collaboration, professionalism, working with community partners, narrative and narrative-based research, and research ethics. This essay also serves as the "pre-test" component of the CoLab program assessment. Each week, Friday afternoon sessions engage students in structured self-reflection, giving them opportunities to observe their learning in real time. The collaboration between the core instructional faculty, leadership team and project leaders in these sessions also models effective collaboration practices for students. At the program's conclusion, a second essay gives students an opportunity to reflect on the full CoLab experience, and is the post-test component of the program assessment.

With limited staffing, budget and year-to-year funding, CoLab's success depends on the collaborative relationships the leadership team has built across campus, especially with the committed faculty who serve as project leaders. Through these faculty members, we have also developed significant relationships with community partners both on and off campus. One community partner, [UMBC Special Collections](#), has offered a project for a student team every

summer since 2018. With faculty and staff support, the program has slowly increased the number of projects offered each summer from three in 2018 serving nine students to seven in 2024 serving 21 students.

## BEST PRACTICES AND LESSONS LEARNED

**PROJECT LEADER TRAINING:** One important takeaway is that the 6-week CoLab summer session goes by quickly, so projects and project leaders need to be ready to go from the first day. Given this reality, the leadership team has developed a series of two workshops for project leaders that take place during the spring semester. The workshops acquaint them with the program's project-based learning philosophy, student learning goals and core curriculum and guide them in creating a pedagogy and supervision plan tailored to their specific projects. Together, the workshops facilitate development of project-specific curricula, task lists and timelines. They also facilitate coordination of necessary project-specific workshops and resources. Project-specific workshops are generally very practice oriented, covering skills-related topics such as digital storytelling, project-specific software, marketing and promotion, scriptwriting and prop-making, or thematic overviews of issues such as climate change. We also use the spring to plan any field trips necessary to engage students in the practices and commitments of on- and off-campus partners. In this way, all necessary project activities are scheduled in advance.

**A STRONG CORE CURRICULUM AND PROJECT LEADERS:** The program's curriculum is also vital to CoLab's success. First-week workshops on best practices for interdisciplinary collaboration, professionalism in the 21st century, working with community partners and narrative-based research provide an invaluable common foundation for developing students' skills and confidence. When these workshops are coupled with intentional instruction in the metacognitive skill of structured self-reflection, students achieve a high level of durable learning. In the annual and five-year assessments, based on direct measures by project leaders and the leadership team, students achieved an advanced level of proficiency on each of the learning goals. Indirect measures of student learning likewise provided strong evidence of CoLab's impact. In particular, students' self-assessments indicated significant learning of soft skills that are critical to success in any field. They reported substantial growth in their collaborative abilities, greater confidence in those abilities and greater appreciation of the value of working in interdisciplinary teams. Students often described CoLab as the best group project of their college careers. They noted that the concrete emphasis on collaborative skills helped them learn to effectively present their point of view, listen carefully to others, negotiate their differences and synthesize their individual contributions into a final product of which they were proud.

Students further reported that the unique experience of working closely with an expert project leader within a student-driven project was vital to their success, and that CoLab taught them to trust in teamwork and boosted confidence in their ability to thrive in collaborative settings. One student described the unique character of CoLab by saying, "the essence

behind CoLab: three people divided by backgrounds, skills, and majors, but working towards a common mission.” The boost in collaboration skills and confidence was especially notable for women and minoritized student participants, two groups whose voices are often sidelined in group projects. These data validate that the careful composition of interdisciplinary teams and instruction in concrete tools for effective collaboration and structured self-reflection are fundamental to CoLab’s success. The results of the alumni survey also demonstrate that this learning is durable. Former CoLab participants reported that they continue to use the skills they developed through the CoLab experience. Moreover, the collaborative skills they developed transferred easily into their professional experiences. Likewise, the confidence they gained in their abilities, along with their greater trust in teamwork, has made them more effective team members in subsequent academic and professional work.

**ROBUST ASSESSMENT:** The strong results for student learning provided by CoLab have been apparent from the beginning. Nonetheless, CoLab has benefited from a robust assessment process. Annual assessments of student learning include 1) project leader scores of student proficiency in the learning outcomes; 2) the leadership team analysis of the pre- and post-essays; and 3) a student focus group at the session conclusion. Additionally, at the end of each session, the leadership team sends anonymous online surveys to both project leaders and community partner members for a 360-degree robust assessment process. These tools identify areas for improvement, which the leadership team uses to inform program refinements, which are then assessed, thus both “closing” and “doubling” the “assessment loop.” We have supplemented annual assessments with a five-year assessment that evaluates the achievement of program goals and the effectiveness of the administrative model over time. One key finding of the assessment process is the value of the self-reflection practices built into the initial curriculum. These practices were intended primarily as accountability measures, but both formal and informal student feedback make clear that they are an indispensable tool for enhancing student learning and appreciation of their skills, the skills of others and collaborative work. Furthermore, self-reflection is a valuable life skill that students can take advantage of throughout their education and career.

## CHALLENGES AND PRIORITIES FOR THE FUTURE

The CoLab program faces two main challenges for the future: 1) sustainability and 2) scaling the program’s reach and impact.

**SUSTAINABILITY:** The program is currently funded year-to-year on soft money from the provost. We have submitted a proposal to the budget office for base funding. However, a transition between provosts has delayed review and approval of that proposal. Additionally, we have been hampered by the limitations of faculty time and resources. As mentioned above, managing CoLab is an add-on to the core responsibilities of the leadership team members. For these reasons, our efforts have been focused on stabilizing the program and modestly

expanding the number of projects offered. Given the limited staff and soft budget, CoLab's success has depended on the collaborative relationships built across campus, especially with the dedicated faculty project leaders and community partners both on and off campus. CoLab's future depends, then, on the leadership team's continuing work to sustain and expand this vital network. CoLab's future also depends on the leadership team's ongoing efforts to address institutional barriers to the program's effective integration into the university curriculum as well as to demonstrate the program's high impact on student learning to upper administrators. These relationship-building and networking efforts represent a significant portion of the time the leadership team invests in the program, which is a key reason that additional program staff are needed.

**GROWTH AND EXPANSION:** Once permanent funding is secured to support the CoLab core activities, the leadership team will pursue a strategy for expansion that will include increasing the program's visibility on campus, increasing faculty and student engagement, and building more strategic community partnerships. We will pursue external sources of funding to support this expansion.

Currently, CoLab is a niche, summer-only program that exists outside the usual structures of the university curriculum, presenting challenges for both its sustainability and growth. While student applications have grown quickly because it is a paid internship for which students also receive course credit, faculty and staff engagement in the program has taken more time to generate. Here again, the level of faculty interest grows as previous faculty project leaders and community partners share their overwhelmingly positive experiences with CoLab. In addition, the practice of annually hosting the university president's visit with CoLab teams has also raised the program's profile on campus as upper administrators learn about the amazing things CoLab students are doing. The growth in faculty/staff engagement is largely responsible for the expansion from the three projects in 2018 to the seven projects this year.

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**—CoLab student on the impact of the program**

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**PRIORITIES FOR THE FUTURE:** Some possible routes for growth include: securing a place for CoLab among official university internship opportunities; integrating CoLab into the applied experiences being considered as part of general education revisions; and/or affiliating CoLab with other campus community-engaged activities. Students in the public humanities minor and the media and communication studies major can use CoLab to fulfill their internship requirements. The program has also been an attractive option for students and faculty in small units that do not have formal internship programs, such as gender, women's and sexuality studies. More fully attaching CoLab to departmental and the general education curricula might garner additional institutional resources for the program. This strategy would also further

raise the visibility of the program on campus and potentially increase both faculty and student engagement. The program could also be expanded by creating multi-year projects that work with a community partner or faculty member in successive summers. Another option for expansion we are eager to pursue is to increase the number of projects that support the research of humanities and interdisciplinary faculty. Also, working more strategically with the campus research centers to sponsor projects could help us with another challenge: the need to increase the number of STEM projects offered. Increasing STEM projects could also aid in building cross-college faculty participation and in developing additional community partnerships. Finally, developing more robust assessment data collection from alumni and community partners could better allow program leadership to tell CoLab stories while also making data-driven arguments for CoLab's value to the university.

**University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC) is a public research university with approximately 15,000 undergraduate and graduate students. UMBC offers 61 undergraduate majors and over 92 graduate programs.**