Eleven years ago, an emergency-room physician pitched a bold, twice-rejected proposal to his alma mater. Within eight months, it took shape as the International Rescue and Relief Program (IRR), a curriculum offered nowhere else and so unique that prospective students still learn of it through Google. In its first eight years, this program at Union College in Lincoln, Nebraska, graduated 63 students, of whom 13 were pursuing graduate degrees and 48 worked in a related field. Creating the IRR program meant, and still means, overcoming inertia, financial risks, and the preference to play things safe. The analysis below describes these and other critical challenges, and concludes with observations that may be applicable to schools facing a variety of unexpected academic opportunities with the potential to either enhance or weaken the institution.

**How the Concept Originated**

IRR originated in the physical and spiritual journeys of Michael Duehrssen, the emergency-room physician mentioned above. During a medical mission trip to the Brazilian Amazon in 2000, he witnessed the dire material needs yet peaceful contentedness of local Christians. The contrast with his own lavish lifestyle discontented him, and he turned to the Bible for meaning. Soon, he became extensively involved with his local church. An avid participant in extreme sports, Duehrssen organized social activities for its youth, including action-based outings that appealed to the younger generation.

Motivated by his study of Ellen White’s predictions of future turmoil and catastrophes, Duehrssen eventually visualized a mission: to create a curriculum to funnel the restless energy of the young into reaching out to survivors of natural calamities using res-
cue and sustenance skills. “We know that Christ is coming soon. . . . With this there will be increasing disasters. What an awesome way to witness—sharing the gospel with those whose lives have just been saved!”4

With several colleagues, Duehrssen drafted a program that included flight school, paramedic and firefighter training, survival skills, and numerous rescue certifications.

Michael Duehrssen clearly had a mission, and Union College’s new Vice President for Academic Administration Malcolm Russell was impressed by his personal testimony and intrigued by the curriculum.5 He decided the proposal merited further study, and presented its basic concepts to then- President David Smith and other administrators. Jeff Joiner, chair of the Division of Health Sciences, had previously sought a program centered on emergency management; he also became a crucial participant in designing courses and structuring the new major.

**Simplifying the Proposal**

The original proposal, including paramedic certification and fixed-wing pilot licensing, could have required seven years to complete, beyond the time limits of denominational subsidies and federal financial assistance.6 The first major concern of Duehrssen, Joiner, and Russell was therefore to pare the proposal to fit into a four-year bachelor’s degree. They removed the flying component, reduced the paramedic certification proposed for all IRR students to the lesser requirements for Emergency Medical Technician (EMT) certification, adjusted the number of mandatory rescue courses, and moved the religion and science requirements into separate elective emphases.

As these planners tweaked the curricular proposals, three foundational elements emerged for the program:

- Rescue and survival training;
- Humanitarian relief, including an international semester devoted to health clinics and public-health projects, as well as responding to disasters within the U.S.; and
- Clinical emergency training incorporated throughout the program.7

To prepare students for job placement or graduate/professional schools, the proposal included the choice of several specific emphases in areas as diverse as pre-dentistry and firefighting, the latter only taught elsewhere. In these ways, the planners successfully reduced the curriculum to four years plus part of one summer. However, they had no guarantee the college would adopt it.

**Six Challenges to Institutional Acceptance**

Founded in 1891, Union College had long proclaimed itself as the “College of the Golden Cords” for its emphasis on international service. Some accomplishments were unique. A history professor, Everett Dick, founded the Medical Cadet Corps to prepare men for military service as noncombatants during World War II.8 Union pioneered Adventist education in social work; and its annual community-service day, Project Impact, has involved nearly the entire campus since 1981, a national record.9

Neither the mission nor vision statement of the college excluded such a program. Indeed, neither defined the academic mission closely enough to guide such a specific policy choice, although phrases such as promoting “joyful service” and a “creative, progressive” environment suggested that IRR would be a good fit.

Open campus communication provided useful feedback. Two months after the initial discussion, even before academic committees dissected the proposal, Russell e-mailed it to faculty and staff, requesting comment. Other announcements followed. Although not unanimous, support eventually became widespread. Several division chairs
Above: IRR students helping survivors after Hurricane Sandy.

Left: Morning worship during the five-week technical rescue training in Colorado.
saw the curriculum’s emphases as opportunities to increase enrollment in their own upper-division courses. Crucially, the most experienced pre-medical advisor and chair of the Division of Science and Mathematics, Don Abbey, supported the concept and worked to strengthen its requirements, though he recognized that IRR might attract pre-medical students away from biology or chemistry. The administration also proposed enrollment targets to ensure that the new program did not simply steal students from existing programs. For some or all of these reasons, eventually IRR came to be seen as potentially valuable for the college as a whole and able to be judged on those grounds, rather than on its impact on an individual program.

2. No need for another small major:
As a small college then enrolling about 800 Full Time Equivalent (FTE) undergraduates and 75 graduate students, Union offered courses in many discl-
plines (nearly 30) and majors (nearly 50). Adding yet another small program would worsen what David S. Cunningham calls “the marginalization of many small programs.” Similarly, Robert Dickeson and others have criticized the tendency of academic institutions to negate their specific missions and to try unrealistically “to be all things to all people.”

However, IRR was never likely to become just another major. Beyond its uniqueness, the program’s complexity and expense negated the possibility that it could operate for just a few students. Bringing the proposal to the Board of Trustees, Russell proposed minimum enrollment expectations, and the board approved IRR with the understanding that it “would be closed if enrollment fell to 15 students in each class.”

3. Too few potential Adventist faculty: Finding qualified Adventist faculty posed significant challenges. While Duehrssen pledged to direct it for sev-
eral years, additional faculty members would be needed in emergency medical services, survival training, and disaster management, all of them specialties where graduate training was uncommon. Moreover, by their very personalities, IRR students valued extensive real-world experience over classroom learning. Retooling an existing professor with a few wilderness courses hardly seemed appropriate—or feasible.

Initially, the local community college provided a temporary solution. At Union's request, it scheduled an additional Emergency Medical Technician (EMT) section without the typical Saturday labs for Union students. Eventually, qualified Adventist faculty members were found, and the college received state certification as an EMT training center. Adjunct faculty also provided expert instruction, while physicians and other personnel strengthened the semester abroad. Nevertheless, faculty turnover in the program has substantially exceeded the college average.

4. Fears of accreditation difficulties: The initial proposal coincided with news that one regional accreditor had forced an Adventist university to close several overseas programs in short order, raising fears about accreditation for an overseas program. However, these concerns proved groundless: Though Union would offer college courses in distant locations, most faculty and all students would come from the main campus. In 2009, the accreditation visiting team from the Higher Learning Commission praised the innovative program.

5. It's a fun major that will produce unemployable graduates: Another strong concern, voiced particularly by parents, alumni, and even trustees, was the employability of graduates of a curriculum that, outside the pre-professional track, might be dismissed as too recreational and insufficiently academic. Practical Midwestern values about placement demanded attention even at the planning stage. Once again, the proposed emphases seemed helpful as preparation for employment or for entry into graduate programs.

6. Concerns about finances: Almost always, small colleges must consider both the financial and academic impacts of a prospective program. With pricey equipment, well-compensated adjuncts for rescue and survival train-
kept the curriculum fairly slim, with a core of 38 semester hours plus substantial cognates for a bachelor of science major. Moreover, they deliberately designed it so that 75 percent of the first two years’ courses were taught in other academic departments. \(^{15}\)

The planners felt they had won a critical victory when Gary Bollinger, Union’s vice president for financial administration, granted his support despite his conviction that the new program would require uncounted hours of personal time in budgeting and other tasks.

7. Risks to students and Union: IRR planned to put students high up on ropes and down in churning rivers. They would live off the land, alone, for multi-day survival training. During the semester abroad, students would risk exposure to malaria, digestive parasites, snake-infested rainforests, and other hazards of the tropics. Clearly the IRR program would greatly increase exposure to risk by students, faculty, and the college. The challenge was to reject unreasonable risks and then insure against accidents.

As an experienced emergency-room physician sensitive to safety concerns, Duehssen addressed some issues during the approval process. \(^{16}\) The most important decision was to adopt professional standards for high-risk activities. The rescue program therefore utilizes certified instructors and teaches to the specifications of Rescue 3 International, a world leader in rope and water-rescue training. \(^{17}\) This approach requires numerous safety features: standardized equipment and procedures, teamwork, and cooperation. It entails using a safety officer to check and double check all rescue rigging. Similar care is taken during solo survival training, when daily updates and urine samples are monitored to avoid severe dehydration and ketone production.

Such attention to detail creates an experience far different than recreational climbing and boating. It aims to install professionalism in students through proper communication, and to enable them to judge if they have the appropriate skills to tackle a rescue. Consequently, students recognize the risk, but the words of one summarize their response: “We waive away liability for the experienced gained.”

In addition to liability waivers, of course, the college annually arranges supplemental high-risk insurance through Adventist Risk Management for all participants in the rescue and survival training.

Lessons Learned

The experiences creating and growing IRR suggest the following lessons when creating new programs:

1. Out-of-the box programs are “outside” for good reason. Establishing IRR required immense assistance from its founder, Dr. Michael Duehssen—inspiration, knowledge, analysis, hard work, and financial contributions. Few institutions have the capacity to dedicate such resources to an idea; only rarely is this assistance volunteered.

2. Innovation within a program will succeed more easily if proponents demonstrate that new ideas work within the broader culture as well as satisfy narrower definitions of institutional purpose. By this measure, IRR has proved a success, with local media often contacting Union College after a disaster.

3. Communicate extensively, both officially and informally, especially soon after an initial description of the basic concepts has been distributed. If the title of the bestseller by Thomas Friedman is correct, the world is “flat” in the 21st century, \(^{18}\) and it is preferable to face objections early on, when they may serve as constructive criticism, rather than wait for a complete proposal carefully developed by a small group but flawed by lack of input.

4. Flexibility is essential, particularly by major administrators. Mutual respect between the chief financial and academic officers often yields unexpected benefits.

5. Even in times of financial austerity, many benefits transcend a narrow monetary focus.
Postscript: IRR in Action

Because it was created on a campus with minimal bureaucracy, the IRR program received conceptual approval by the Union College board of trustees just seven months after the initial discussions. Its successful implementation was bolstered by the image and personality of its first director. Duehrssen’s charisma, vibrant Christianity, and personal history excited the imaginations of prospective students and greatly contributed to the initial enrollment of 35 students.\(^{19}\)

A decade later, the International Rescue and Relief program has proven popular, durable, and ever-changing. It is directed by Rick Young, an Eagle Scout, former camp director, and 28-year law-enforcement veteran. One of the four largest programs at the college, it attracts students from across the U.S. Although its net financial contribution to the college may be marginal (though usually positive), its students liven the campus, enhance diversity, and provide a significant portion of the critical mass necessary for academic accomplishment. Although difficult to prove, the presence of IRR has apparently infused the campus culture with a greater flexibility and willingness to innovate. It has also constantly refocused the institution’s emphasis on service.\(^{20}\)

The overseas semester has changed more than any other component of the program. The initial destination in Venezuela was abandoned because of political challenges from a government suspicious of North Americans roaming border regions to offer medical services that competed with government programs. After a difficult crisis, the program relocated to Central America, where students and faculty have worked closely with local churches and mission groups in Honduras and Nicaragua. The overseas semester remains highly popular and an invaluable experience for students; indeed, many of them determine their professional goals during rigorous weeks in the tropics.

Another highly innovative element, the IRR Disaster Response Team, has enabled students and faculty to respond immediately to disasters. Most recently, late in 2013 a group of alumni and faculty provided medical and relief assistance to survivors of Typhoon Haiyan with Team Rubicon in Tacloban, the most devastated region of the Philippines.\(^{21}\) IRR teams have also assisted in Haiti, Texas, Alabama, the Gulf Coast, and the East Coast of the U.S. Locally, the program partners with the American Red Cross chapter in responding to local fire emergencies and disasters such as tornados and floods, and in 2014, the college’s Red Cross Club led by Young received the chapter’s Tribute to Heroes Disaster Relief Award. However, because faculty and students alike have limited ability to assemble during the summer, the challenge remains to keep a team prepared to deploy during much of the Midwest’s tornado season.

Despite recent concern about the scarcity of jobs for U.S. college graduates, the placement of IRR graduates has exceeded national averages, though challenges remain in some highly technical niches. The program’s uniqueness has benefitted many of its graduates, enabling them to combine unusual accomplishments with regular learning. Thus, IRR students have earned a distinctive reputation in medical-school applications, with the program’s emphasis on Christ-centeredness, stamina, rigor, altruistic service, and fortitude being particularly strong recommendations.

Thanks to IRR, Union College is better known to the wider world. As connections with emergency management and relief organizations and church groups have multiplied, recognition of the school within local, professional, and Adventist communities has increased substantially.\(^{22}\) IRR began with a concept of mission deeply rooted in Adventism. That vision will continue to drive the program. \(\)
was a professor of economics and history at Andrews University in Berrien Springs, Michigan.

Joellyn Sheehy will graduate in 2014 from Union College with a major in International Rescue and Relief with a pre-medical emphasis. She has edited manuscripts and contributed numerous articles for college publications and the Mid-America Union Outlook.

Rick Young, M.Ed., became the Director of the International Rescue and Relief Program at Union College in 2011. During 25 years with the Glendale, California, police department, he received numerous awards for humanitarian service and leadership in school safety. He has also managed camps for the Boy Scouts and the Southern California Conference.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Many of the students who discovered the IRR program through a Web search enriched the program through their perspectives formed by experience in development projects or the military.

2. Rick Young, Departmental data for graduates through the Class of 2012.

3. In 2000, Rich Carlson, vice president for spiritual life at Union College, invited Duehrssen and his wife to join him and a team of Union nursing students in Brazil.

4. Michael Duehrssen, IRR Initial Response Letter, May 4, 2004. All Union College documents cited in this study are available in the college archives or from the office of the vice president for academic administration.

5. Russell e-mailed Duehrssen on July 17, 2003: “It was more than a pleasure to meet with you today. I felt a real spiritual blessing from the conversation.”

6. The initial proposal, drafted with the assistance of Doug Tallman, is “Global Disaster Response and Relief,” e-mailed July 14, 2003.

7. Disaster-management courses have also been incorporated but are subsidiary to these three elements.

8. On the college’s early history, see Everett Dick, Union: College of the Golden Cord (Lincoln, Neb.: Union College Press, 1967). The medical-cadet corps program is described on pages 314 to 317.

9. The legitimacy of IRR as a major was undoubtedly aided by the rapid movement of American higher education out of the liberal arts into new areas. It is hard to imagine how a similar program could have received approval by accrediting agencies two decades ago.


13. Program retention occasionally falls below the college average, but not by a great deal, and the loss to the program is offset somewhat by those who remain at Union to pursue other majors.


15. By avoiding the temptation to load freshmen and sophomores with IRR courses, IRR reduced its income. On the other hand, this benefited students who decided that IRR was not for them. They would have completed more courses meeting general-education requirements and might have identified a desired major.


19. After directing the IRR program for several years and then serving as its medical director, Duehrssen is now developing Radical Rescue, a novel youth-ministry program to place trained young-adult volunteers in local churches. For details, see his Website: http://www.radicalrescue.org.

20. Another interesting outcome is the development of analogous programs at other Adventist institutions. While dissimilar on some levels and usually lacking an overseas component, they illustrate a trend in adopting curricula with active, hands-on components.

21. Team Rubicon is a disaster relief Non-Government Organization comprised primarily of veterans and active medical professionals committed to reintegrating U.S. veterans into civilian life.

22. For example, beyond local media attention, in 2013 the IRR director was invited to a workshop hosted by Center for Homeland Defense and Security at the Naval Postgraduate School Center in Monterey, California.