



HIGHLANDS COLLEGE

A PROPOSAL

HC Innovate

Build what could be.

A strategic memo and proposal. The case for building an innovation function at Highlands College now, the model it would run on, and the open lane we should claim before someone else does.

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Highlands College · 2026



HC INNOVATE

BUILD WHAT COULD BE

PART ONE

The conviction.

Before the model, the belief. What we hold to be true about this moment, about Highlands College, and about what a small team can now build.

01 Why Now

The distance just collapsed.

Highlands College has never been short on vision. What changed, just in the last few years, is the distance between a vision and a thing you can hold. The research, the design, the build, the round of revision: each step that used to take a department and a year can now be done by a few people, sometimes one person, in a matter of days.

A formative trip site built in an evening. A cohort experience built in ten hours. A campus master plan made explorable in four. None of this was theoretical. It already happened here.

That collapse in cost is the whole opportunity. When an experiment costs a year, an institution can afford only a few, and it spends them carefully. When an experiment costs a week, the math changes. You can try more, learn faster, and keep only what works. HC Innovate exists to put that new speed in service of the mission, on purpose and as a habit, not by happy accident.

This memo makes the case for that function, lays out the model it would run on, and reads the field honestly. The recommendation is direct. Highlands College should build HC Innovate, and should build it now, while the lane is open and the tools are new. The pages that follow show why, and how.

02 What We Believe

Four convictions underneath the work.

These are not arguments the function will keep making. They are assumptions it carries into the room.

ONE

Vision is everywhere

The people closest to a student's confusion, a process's friction, or an unmet opportunity are not always the people with a title over it. Good ideas are distributed, not concentrated by org chart.

TWO

Distinct, not only distinguished

Doing the inherited things better makes us distinguished. Doing things our peers are not doing makes us distinct. Highlands College pursues both. This function exists for the second.

THREE

Formation is the point

For ministry, the integrity of a person's life is part of the qualification. The work stays attentive to ideas that form people, not only ideas that tune systems.

FOUR

Borrow the best, then surpass

We do not need to invent from zero. We find whoever does a thing best, learn it honestly, and make it our own and deeper. We say it with a smile: we will find whoever is best, for now.

PART TWO

The strategic case.

What the field is doing, what our peers prove and warn, and the one lane no one has truly claimed. Read honestly, so we choose with our eyes open.

03 The Moment

The field is moving, unevenly.

Artificial intelligence is moving through higher education faster than any technology in a generation, and Christian colleges are not sitting it out. A few have moved early and hard. Most are still deciding where to begin. The window in which a school can move from follower to leader is open now, while the tools are new and the practices are still being written. Windows like this do not stay open long.

The honest read is that the schools moving fastest are largely optimizing for scale, workforce relevance, and access. Those are real and worthy aims. They are also not the only lane, and they are not the lane that fits Highlands College best. To see why, it helps to look closely at two peers and then at the wider field.

04 Lipscomb

The aggressive leader, read closely.

Lipscomb University is the clearest example of a Christian institution treating AI as a strategic imperative rather than a department project. The pattern is worth studying because it is good, and because much of it is borrowable.

Lipscomb formed an AI Committee about two years ago to build a responsible integration strategy, and that group now advises on policy, training, and academic integration. In 2024 it launched Nashville's first graduate degree and certificate in applied AI, built so that a professional from any discipline can enter without a computer-science background. In summer 2025 it published an official AI usage policy, and in the fall it became the first private, faith-based university in the nation to give every student, faculty, and staff member enterprise-level access to leading AI tools through a campus-wide BoodleBox integration, with data security and FERPA compliance built in. It appointed one of the country's first faculty fellows for AI, and it created an inaugural Chief Innovation Officer, whose own framing is striking: AI, he says, is not the point, it is a catalyst for innovation.

"AI is not just a tool. It is a catalyst for innovation in higher education."

Todd McCullough, inaugural Chief Innovation Officer, Lipscomb University, 2025

Two things are worth naming. First, much of this is a playbook Highlands College can borrow directly: a standing advisory group, a written policy, enterprise tools with real training, a faculty fellow model, and a named senior owner. Second, Lipscomb's center of gravity is workforce relevance and its Nashville market, delivered substantially through graduate and professional programs. That is a strong position. It is also a different one from ours. It leaves the residential, formation-intensive lane largely open.

05 Southeastern

Scale won, and the structural lesson.

Southeastern University deserves real credit. Over the last fifteen years it built the SEU Network, an extension model now spanning more than two hundred partner sites, and grew enrollment by more than two hundred percent since 2010 to roughly eleven thousand five hundred students, several thousand of them fully online. President Kent Ingle has pushed genuinely novel models, including competency-based and subscription-based education. By the numbers, SEU's bet on access and scale worked.

The lesson for Highlands College is not that SEU failed. It is structural, and it is twofold. SEU's innovation is breadth-first: more students, more sites, more delivery modes. That is a different thing from deepening the formation of students in residence. And in its org chart, innovation sits bundled with advancement, under a single Senior Vice President of Advancement and Innovation. When exploratory work is housed inside the office responsible for raising money and growing enrollment, it tends, over time, to be measured by those goals. The innovation that survives is the innovation that scales or sells.

Breadth is not depth, and an innovation function reporting into advancement will, in time, serve advancement. Both are reasons Highlands College should build differently.

This is not a criticism of a school that has done remarkable things. It is the single most useful design lesson available to us, and it directly shapes two choices later in this memo: that HC Innovate sit at the cabinet level as its own function rather than under any single existing office, and that it measure itself on validated learning and formation rather than on scale alone.

06 The Wider Field

Faithful peers are moving. Few are claiming our lane.

Beyond Lipscomb and Southeastern, the evangelical and Christian field is active, which is exactly why the timing matters.

CEDARVILLE UNIVERSITY

First to put AI in every hand

In 2025 Cedarville became the first evangelical Christian university to give its entire campus access to ChatGPT Edu, alongside a new Data Science and AI initiative, framed explicitly around helping students think biblically about the technology.

ABILENE CHRISTIAN

A long habit of being early

ACU put a smartphone in every freshman's hand in 2008, years ahead of the field, and is now running Google-funded research on using AI to widen access to tutoring and teaching. A reminder that Christian schools can pioneer, not only follow.

BIOLA UNIVERSITY

A forty-million-dollar bet

Biola received the largest gift in its history, more than forty million dollars from a Silicon Valley founder, to advance Christian technology education across computer science, engineering, and AI.

BAYLOR UNIVERSITY

Faith-aware AI itself

Baylor joined a consortium building an AllFaith Benchmark, among the first tests of how AI systems engage religion, treating AI as terrain for principled Christian scholarship.

Liberty runs an internal AI research challenge for faculty, and others are forming committees and writing policies. The picture is clear. The field is moving, mostly toward tools, degrees, scale, and access. None of these peers has planted a flag in the lane that is most naturally ours.

07 The Open Lane

Faithful reinvention, done deeply.

The lane no one has truly claimed is the one that fits us best: faithful reinvention at the residential, formation-intensive scale that has always been Highlands College's best work.

We do not need to be the largest, the most online, or the most saturated with any one technology. Lipscomb is proving the tools work in a workforce-facing, market-driven school. Southeastern is proving that scale can be won and that structure determines whether innovation lasts. The space that is open, and that suits our convictions about formation, is the one where a residential community uses these new capabilities to form people more deeply, not merely to reach more of them. That is the flag HC Innovate would plant.

08 Our Method

Creative imitation. Borrow the best, then surpass.

Our philosophy is older than it sounds, and respectable. Peter Drucker called it creative imitation: the innovator who does not invent the product but perfects and positions it, serving a need the pioneers created but did not fully meet. Drucker's own examples were IBM and Procter and Gamble, companies that rarely got there first and routinely ended up best.

That is precisely how HC Innovate would work. We will find whoever does a thing best, today, and we will learn it without ego. We will borrow Lipscomb's rollout discipline, the design world's methods, the research lab's structural independence, and the best of what scale-driven schools have learned. Then we will make each of those our own, fitted to a residential, formation-first community, and we will aim to do it better than the place we learned it from. We say it lightly: we will find whoever is best, for now.

PART THREE

The model.

What HC Innovate is, the design cycle it runs, how an idea moves, how it is governed and organized, and how we would know it is working.

09 What It Is

An innovation function. Not an AI office.

HC Innovate is a small, fast team with one job: take an idea, build the smallest real version of it, and test it in the world, in weeks. It is innovation as a standing capability, not a one-time task force.

AI is its most powerful instrument, and the team would be fluent in it. The function would still exist, and still matter, with or without any single tool. The thinking comes first. The tools serve the thinking. This ordering is the difference between a function that outlasts a technology and one that becomes obsolete the moment the technology does.

It serves the whole college, and it is built especially to serve the people carrying the vision. Leadership has the clearest view of where Highlands College is going. HC Innovate exists to help get there faster, by turning that vision into built things the institution can hold, adopt, or learn from.

What it is not

- Not an AI office, an IT project, or a technology committee.
- Not a research lab. It produces working artifacts, not papers.
- Not the Project Management Office. The PMO runs work whose shape is already known. HC Innovate discovers work whose shape is not yet known. The two are partners, and the handoff between them is a core discipline of the function.
- Not a complaint queue. The door is open to ideas, not grievances.

10 The Design Cycle

How an idea actually gets built.

The method is borrowed from the people who do this best, then fitted to us. It has four layers that nest inside one another, from a mindset down to a calendar.

The mindset is **creative confidence**. Tom and David Kelley, the founders of the design firm IDEO and the Stanford d.school, gave the field the phrase: the conviction that creativity is not a gift reserved for a few but a capacity almost anyone can recover with practice. That is the cultural goal underneath everything here. A janitor, a resident director, and a vice president can each bring a real idea, and each can be coached to help build it.

The cycle is **inspiration, ideation, implementation**. IDEO describes design thinking not as a set of steps but as three overlapping spaces: the problem that starts the search, the generating and testing of ideas, and the path from the workshop into people's lives. Projects loop back through these spaces more than once. We adopt that human-centered, loop-friendly shape as the spine of every project.

The kickoff is a **five-day design sprint**. We borrow the method Jake Knapp developed at Google and refined at Google Ventures: five days that move a team from understanding a problem on Monday to testing a real prototype with real people on Friday. It compresses the front end of innovation from months into a week.

The container is an **eight-week build sprint**. The design sprint opens the work; the eight-week sprint carries it to a decision, so a promising idea does not drift into a permanent prototype and the person who brought it gets a real return date.

Layer	Name	What it is, and where it comes from
Mindset	Creative confidence	Everyone can build. The cultural goal, drawn from the Kelleys at IDEO.
Cycle	Inspiration, ideation, implementation	The human-centered shape of every project, drawn from IDEO. Non-linear; it loops.
Kickoff	Five-day design sprint	Understand, diverge, decide, prototype, test. Drawn from Knapp at Google Ventures.
Container	Eight-week build sprint	Frame and prototype, test in context, pivot or persevere or park, document and decide.

Suspended judgment governs the first conversations and the opening week, when the point is to understand and to imagine. From the third week on, the posture shifts to honest evaluation, where a hypothesis is respected by being tested rather than protected. Adam Grant calls this thinking like a scientist. It is how we stay both generous and rigorous in the same project.

11 The Four Filters

Every idea is weighed against four questions.

FIRST

Advance the mission

Does it extend what Highlands College is for: graduates ready for ministry, churches stronger because we exist?

THEN

Elevate an experience

Does it lift the depth or formation-value of something we already do well?

THEN

Solve a problem

Does it remove a real, named pain for students, faculty, staff, or partners?

THEN

Streamline systems

Does it make existing work meaningfully easier, faster, or more reliable?

An idea must serve at least one filter to enter, and the more it serves, the higher its priority. The order is deliberate. Mission comes first, before efficiency, so the function never drifts into optimizing things that should not survive.

12 How an Idea Enters

An open door, with a covenant.

The door is open to anyone at Highlands College, in person, in conversation, not through a form. A form would filter for the people already comfortable writing a proposal and being judged at a distance, which are exactly the wrong filters. Conversations are held by a small intake team rather than one person, so the function is never reduced to a single personality.

An open door without a covenant becomes a complaint queue within months, so the covenant is explicit. Anyone who brings us an idea hears the same promise, in plain words:

We value what you see. We will take it seriously, route it well, and never make you regret bringing it. We will not promise to do everything. We will promise to listen, and to be honest about the answer.

In practice that means we will not relitigate decisions that are not ours, mediate disputes, or take over work that already belongs to someone else. Every conversation ends with a clear route: into a sprint, into more thinking, back for a reframe, a warm handoff to the right owner, or word that it is already in motion.

13 Speed With Care

Fast where we can, careful where we must.

Most work moves fast because most work is safe. Experiments on public or operational data with no personal information can run in days. Work that touches student records, employee or partner data, or anything that affects a person's standing takes the careful, reviewed path it should, with the right agreements in place before it begins. Lipscomb's own rollout is instructive here: it paired campus-wide access with a written policy and FERPA-compliant, secure tools rather than leaving people to consumer apps. We would do the same. The variable that sets the pace is sensitivity and impact, never whether AI happens to be involved.

14 How It Is Organized

Small, senior, and structurally its own.

The structure follows directly from the Southeastern lesson. HC Innovate would sit at the cabinet table with an executive sponsor there, reporting in for now through the COO and the Chief of Staff, and explicitly not buried inside any single existing office. There is room to grow into a dedicated senior role, a Vice President of Innovation or Chief Innovation Officer, as the function earns it. Lipscomb's decision to name a Chief Innovation Officer suggests where this tends to lead once it proves its worth.

The team is small by design: a director, two or three core members, and a rotating pool of faculty fellows who carry the posture back into their departments. Lipscomb's faculty fellow for AI is the same instinct. It works across departments by relationship and credibility, not by line authority. No department reports to it. It convenes, builds, and hands off.

The person who leads it would need theological grounding, operational discipline, fluency in the tools, and trust across the college. More gardener than expert, in Safi Bahcall's sense: someone whose job is to tend the space between this work and the rest of the institution, not to pick winners.

15 How We Would Know

Two kinds of evidence.

First, what gets built. The specific things HC Innovate produces that would not have existed otherwise, and what changed because of them. Following Eric Ries, the unit of progress is validated learning, the assumptions we tested and what we learned, not the volume of activity. We would rather show three real artifacts than a dashboard of motion.

Second, what it does to the culture. The honest measure of that is the engagement of the people near the work, and Gallup's Q12 is the best-validated instrument for it, twelve questions that predict retention, performance, and morale. We would propose adopting it as a standing

measure of whether HC Innovate is doing its cultural work. These are the items it is built to move.

Gallup Q12 item	How HC Innovate moves it
"My opinions seem to count"	Anyone can bring an idea and watch a team build it. Little tells a person their voice matters more than seeing it become real.
"Someone encourages my development"	Faculty fellowships, coaching toward building, and a standing invitation to work on something beyond your job description.
"Recognition for good work"	Finished artifacts get named and shipped, and the weekly habit of naming what we learned, even from what failed, makes good work visible.
"I get to do what I do best"	People build in their area of strength, on problems they actually see, instead of waiting for permission.
"The mission makes my work feel important"	Every sprint is tied to the mission by the first filter, so the work visibly advances why we exist.

A team that can bring an idea and watch it get built experiences those things as true. We would not headline tools adopted or software seats. Those are means, not the work.

16 Built to Stay Useful

We retire as honestly as we launch.

Every effort carries a review date from the day it starts, a moment to ask whether it still serves or has simply become something we keep because we built it. Olin College, one of the boldest experiments in engineering education, named its own hardest lesson this way: institutions accumulate, and innovation gets harder as the pile of things to protect grows. Naming the discipline of letting go, from the beginning, is one of the most useful habits this function can model. The annual review names what was set down alongside what was launched.

PART FOUR

The path.

Where it would start, what the first season looks like, and the recommendation we are making.

17 What We Have Already Built

You have already seen what this produces.

None of this is theoretical. Each of these was imagined and built by a single individual, from first idea to finished artifact, in hours and days, with the kind of tools HC Innovate would put to work every week.

BUILT IN 10 HOURS

Atlas Cohorts

A formative week for HC students and partners together, in a city that teaches them both. A working site you could walk through, not a deck.

BUILT IN AN EVENING

HC in Oxford

A live, mobile, offline-ready guide for a study trip. Fifteen stops, readings, and logistics, carried into the field.

BUILT IN 4 HOURS

The Campus Plan

The strategic master plan, rendered as an interactive experience leadership could explore and question, instead of a static PDF.

Each began as a question on an ordinary day and existed, in a form you could open and use, that same week. HC Innovate is the function that makes work like this normal instead of rare.

18 Where It Could Start

The first sprints, ready to run.

S1

AI across the HC team

Put the newest tools, with real training, in the hands of the whole Highlands College team, paired with a clear policy and secure, FERPA-aware tooling. The people who know the mission best, equipped to build with it. We start here because the best ideas come from a team that can move. This is the on-ramp; the vision is bigger than it.

S2

Project 800

Highlands College promises every student 800 hours of hands-on ministry training. As we grow toward a thousand students, that becomes 800,000 hours of formation across eight majors and eight campuses. HC Innovate could build the system that makes those hours visible: light weekly logging, honest reflection, and AI-assisted insight into how students are actually being formed. Not to police a number, but to keep faith with the promise.

S3

Atlas Cohorts

Develop the first cohort with Advancement: HC students and a Highlands College partner formed together in a city that teaches them both. A week that forms people on both sides, where the cultivation is the formation, not a separate ask.

S4

Marriage and family formation

Explore preparing students for the part of a minister's life that formal training rarely reaches: dating, engagement, marriage, and family. An honest exploration of what could serve, not a finished program.

Beyond these: microsites for flipped-classroom prework, purpose-built apps for missions trips, a single place that holds everything an HC student needs. The list is not a roadmap. It is the range.

19 The First 90 Days

What the first season would look like.

Days 1 to 30	The sponsor and director are named. The charter is shared. The open door begins, likely with people who already have ideas waiting and nowhere to bring them.
Days 30 to 60	The first sprint or two begin, starting with AI enablement for the team. The faculty fellow pool forms. The speed-with-care gates are documented with the right people in the room.
Days 60 to 90	The first sprint completes, with a real artifact, an honest decision, and the first numbers. The Gallup Q12 baseline is set. The first quarterly review is delivered.

A function that has done these things has done enough to be evaluated. One that has launched a flagship in ninety days has confused itself with what it is for.

20 More Than the Work

Marketing, recruiting, and a culture that compounds.

Even if HC Innovate only ever produced its direct outputs, it would earn its keep. But the second-order returns may matter as much as the first.

MARKETING

Every sprint is a story

The function produces a steady stream of distinctive, shareable proof that Highlands College is reinventing formation on purpose. Atlas Cohorts, the Oxford guide, and the interactive campus plan are not only useful; they are marketing assets and earned-media moments that money cannot easily buy. A school that builds the future has a story worth telling, and HC Innovate generates that story as a byproduct of its real work.

RECRUITING

A magnet for the mission-aligned

Prospective students and their families increasingly ask what a college is doing about AI and the future of work. A visible, faith-rooted innovation function is a clear admissions differentiator, and it signals to the best prospective faculty and staff that this is a place where good ideas get built. It helps us attract people, and it helps us keep the ones we already have.

CULTURE

The hierarchy of permission, flattened

The deepest return is cultural. When anyone can bring an idea and watch it get built, the quiet assumption that good ideas belong to people with titles begins to dissolve. That shift toward shared ownership, psychological safety, and energy lifts a whole organization, and it shows up directly in the Gallup Q12 scores named above. A team that can build is a team that stays.

21 The Ask

What we are proposing.

This is a proposal, and the recommendation is clear. Highlands College should establish HC Innovate now, as a small, cabinet-level function, and let it prove itself in its first ninety days. The lane is open, the tools are new, and the cost of building has never been lower. The cost of waiting is that a peer claims the ground that is most naturally ours.

Concretely, we propose three decisions.

01

Approve the function

Establish HC Innovate as a standing, cabinet-level function with an executive sponsor, reporting for now through the COO and Chief of Staff.

02

Name a sponsor and a lead

Identify the executive sponsor and the person to lead it, against the profile in this memo, and give it a small real team and a real budget.

03

Start the first sprint within 30 days

Begin with AI enablement for the HC team, then Project 800 and Atlas Cohorts, and let the work, not the plan, make the next case.

We do not need to be the largest or the most online. We need to be the school that proves faithful reinvention at residential, formation-deep scale. That is a lane we can lead.

The lane is open. Let's claim it.

APPENDIX

Grounded in what works.

The thinking and the sources underneath this memo. Our method is to borrow what already works, so it is only right to name where it comes from.

A1 The Frameworks

What we are building on.

HC Innovate is assembled from practice, not invented from theory. We borrow openly, and we name what we borrow.

Structure. The function's independence follows **Safi Bahcall's Loonshots**, which shows why fragile early ideas need separation from day-to-day operations, and a gardener to tend the boundary.

Method. The design cycle follows **IDEO and the Kelleys** for creative confidence and human-centered design, and **Jake Knapp's design sprint** for speed.

Measurement and posture. The accounting follows **Eric Ries and the Lean Startup**, measuring validated learning so a young function survives its first hard quarter. The habit of testing rather than defending ideas follows **Adam Grant**, and the long horizon follows **Simon Sinek's infinite game**.

Philosophy. The whole approach of borrowing and bettering is **Peter Drucker's creative imitation**.

Peers. The practical lessons come from **Lipscomb, Southeastern, Cedarville, Abilene Christian, Biola, and Baylor**, and the ambition has a secular precedent in **Michael Crow's** redesign of Arizona State. We learn from each, then make it our own.

A2 Sources and Further Reading

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