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# Top Benefits of Clusters

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# Top Benefits of Clusters

Over the past two years, I've blogged as a method of sharing my thoughts that address various aspects of our Integrated Clusters learning model. These have included "Why Clusters," "The Impact of Clusters," "The Move to Clusters," and "Shared Governance." Now, as we leave the 'murky middle' and full implementation of Clusters is upon us, I find it important to share the benefits that we have seen for our students and Plymouth State University. The lists below summarize input we have received from numerous areas on campus during conversations, meetings, and discussions, and will surely grow and change as we continue our work together. Please share with me specific benefits you see in your everyday work.

## Benefits to Students

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**Teamwork:** Students learn to work in teams across disciplines—a critical skill set for life after the University.

**Connections:** Students learn how their major connects to other disciplines—finding increased relevance in all of their studies.

**Experiential:** Students experience relevant learning through project-based activities—resulting in greater potential to persist to graduation, proven increase in longterm retention, and better ability to apply knowledge.

**Workforce Ready:** Students build skill-sets around their majors that allow them to follow their passion and better apply their knowledge and abilities in an ongoing learning environment. They graduate ready to create and work with others in teams, through their engagement with students in other disciplines as well as external partners in Cluster projects and internships. This prepares students to meet the future expectations of employers and graduate programs.

**Network:** Students have learning experiences with community members, contributing to life outside of the University, and allowing them to build a network of experiences and connections. Students graduate with professional and community networks in New Hampshire, making them more likely to be able to stay and work in the state or elsewhere with the references they build.

**Opportunity:** Students are provided with opportunities to weave together theory and practice by applying their knowledge to real-life challenges and to finding solutions to future complex

problems—graduating ready to tackle challenges with collaborative skill-sets such as problem-solving, communication skills, deeper critical thinking, and resilience. Residential Learning, Clusters Open Laboratories, and study spaces provide students the ability to better utilize out of classroom time for individual team and project-based learning.

**Affordability:** Clusters hold the promise of integrating subject matter in ways that provide a more affordable education.

**Synergy:** Clusters, integrated, and project-based learning afford opportunities for all students to excel. Traditional college-bound students learn the strength of teams and mentorship-based learning and the more hands-on students are part of a learning relationship in which all types of knowledge and ability are valued—resulting in increased success in and out of college.

## Benefits to Plymouth State

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**Building Our Reputation:** Plymouth State is emerging as a cutting-edge university known for its innovative Integrated Clusters learning model with relevant disciplines, programs, and majors.

**Increasing Our Funding:** Plymouth State is being acknowledged by the State, alumni, donors, and grantors who recognize, and are passionate about, our learning model, which prepares our students for a twenty-first century world while improving our communities.

**Focusing Our Resources:** Integrated Clusters focus us into specific areas of opportunity—allowing us to excel, operate efficiently, and resonate with our location while also sharing resources to create Cluster projects/ majors/ programs.

**Enhancing Our Marketing:** With outreach focused on our Integrated Cluster learning model and unique programs, which support recruitment and retention efforts that differentiate us in a competitive higher education landscape.

**Recruiting Students:** Utilizing the seven Integrated Clusters, we can reach today's traditional college-bound population, "Generation Z" (iGEN) and their parents. Gen Z are technological natives who know how to access data but need to learn how to work with others to synthesize, validate, and build on it to create new ideas. They jump to join social causes; are entrepreneurial, future focused, and grew up in a health-conscious world; are concerned about the environment and the human impact on the planet; and demonstrate concern about security

in online and offline environments. The Integrated Clusters learning model resonates as well with potential student-athletes who already have a passion to work in group-like, problem-solving situations.

***Recruiting Faculty and Staff:*** Our engaging pedagogy, with real-world and résumé-building applications, face-to-face interactions in and out of the classroom, networking experience, and preparation to tackle whatever the future may bring, is attractive to ambitious higher ed professionals.

***Improving Community Engagement and Economic Success:*** By providing opportunities for collaborations between students, alumni, faculty, and staff through active participation in Cluster projects, and by creating solutions to complex problems in an increasingly interdisciplinary world, we're improving the area in which we thrive. Career development connections and affinity-based alumni chapters increase while helping to build the economy students will find jobs in within profit and nonprofit businesses.

***Expanding:*** We're growing to link to and establish relationships with K–12 schools that engage in project-based learning and community colleges that have more hands-on learners.

***Sustainability:*** Clusters hold the promise of creating a more sustainable, integrated education and learning institution that does not spread limited resources over disconnected programs and subject matter. It also enables us to better tap funding sources.