

Thriving in
Change and
Complexity

Rising to the challenge in
Continuing Education

CAUCE CONFERENCE 2026
HALIFAX | MAY 13-15

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Halifax, Nova Scotia · May 13 - 15





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The Real Price of Programs

Chris Smith and
Morgan Bender –
Western University

Land Acknowledgement

We acknowledge that Western University is located on the traditional territories of the Anishinaabek Haudenosaunee, Lūnaapéewak and Chonnonton Nations, on lands connected with the London Township and Sombra Treaties of 1796 and the Dish with One Spoon Covenant Wampum.

This land continues to be home to diverse Indigenous Peoples (First Nations, Métis and Inuit) whom we recognize as contemporary stewards of the land and vital contributors of our society.

The Real Price of Programs:

A Framework That Reveals What CE Leaders Miss

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**From “does it fill?”
to “does it
sustainably
contribute?”**

A practical model for seeing the complete economics of non-credit programming.

Session roadmap

A simple structure built around one core idea: better visibility leads to better decisions.

1

Why traditional profitability views fail

2

What belongs in an all-in model

3

How WCS applied it

4

How attendees can adapt it

Audience interaction is built in

Live polls, a worksheet exercise, and discussion/Q&A segment.

Outcome for participants

A customizable framework to evaluate current programs, forecast new offerings, and talk more clearly with leadership.

Why listen to us?

This framework came out of real portfolio management decisions, not a theoretical exercise.

3,909

students served in 2025

200+

sections delivered

123

courses in the non-credit portfolio

+26%

ProDev growth in 2025

What changed

Growth came from tighter portfolio decisions, not simple expansion.

The strategic point

Growth did not come only from adding more. It came from understanding full costs, aligning resources, and making clearer decisions about where to invest, refresh, or stop.



What kind of unit do you represent?



What is your mandate?

① The Slido app must be installed on every computer you're presenting from



What inputs do you use to determine profitability?

Why traditional profitability views fail

Many units are deciding with a partial picture.

Traditional view

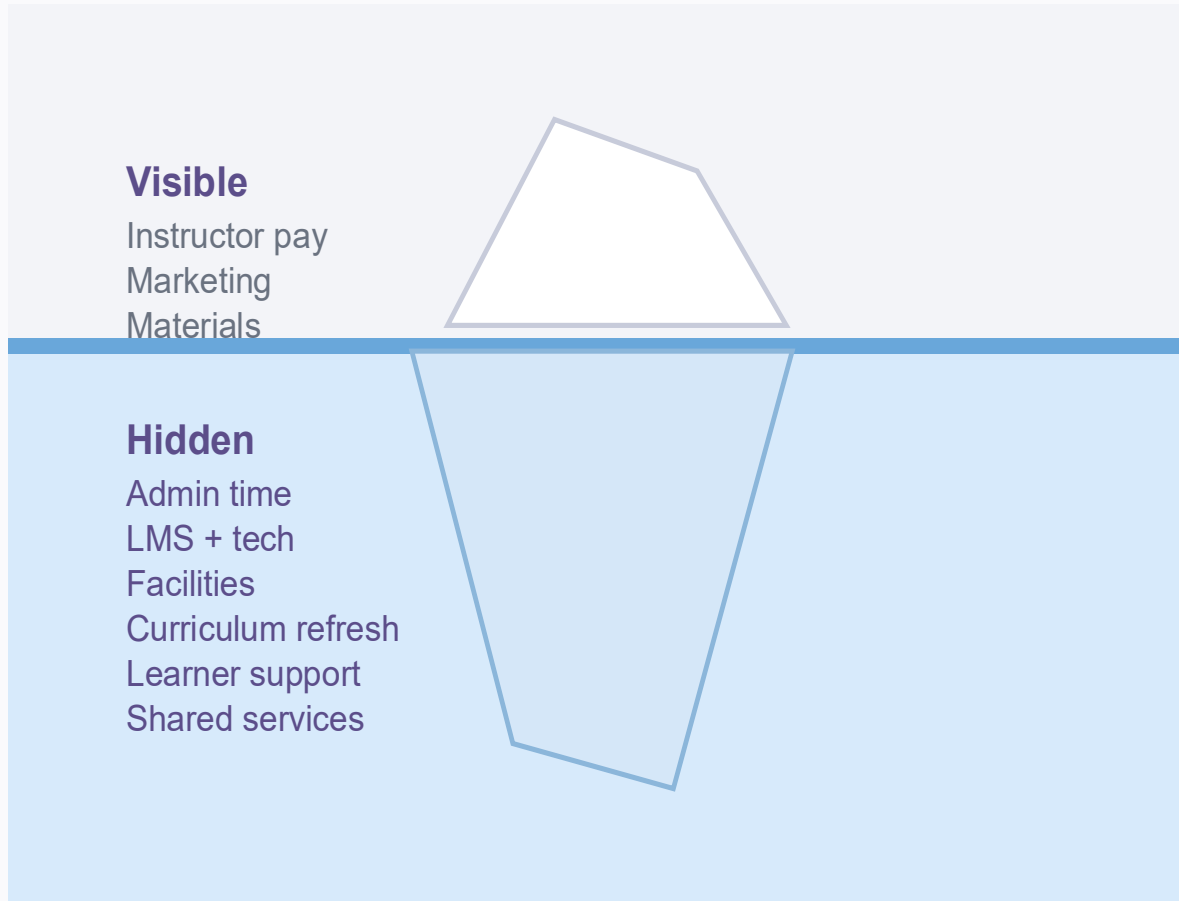
Tuition revenue – a few direct costs =
“profitability”

What gets missed

Admin time, technology, space, learner support, redevelopments, and shared services often sit outside the decision conversation.

The costing iceberg

What is easiest to see is usually not what determines sustainability.



Why this matters

- Partial costing can make weak programs appear healthy.
- It can also make strong-demand programs look overpriced or underperforming.
- Hidden costs accumulate quietly over time through support load and redevelopment needs.
- Without the full picture, launch, scale, and sunset decisions become distorted.

What partial costing leads to

The downstream consequences are strategic, not just financial.

Underpriced offers

Programs look affordable, but margins never cover full operating costs.

Overpriced high-demand offerings

You may over-correct without understanding the market.

Expansion of quiet losses

Popular offerings can scale while eroding overall profitability and straining resources.

Innovation gets crowded out

Legacy programming consumes capacity that feeds new offerings.

Mission drift or missed demand

You cannot see clearly where you are subsidizing, investing or when to stop.

What belongs in an all-in model

The goal wasn't precision, but a holistic understanding.

Revenue / activity assumptions

- Tuition / price point
- Number of sections
- Expected enrolment
- Course or contact hours
- Frequency / cadence

Direct costs

- Instruction
- Coaching
- Contract facilitation
- Course materials
- Specific marketing spend
- Assessment or credentialing costs

Indirect costs

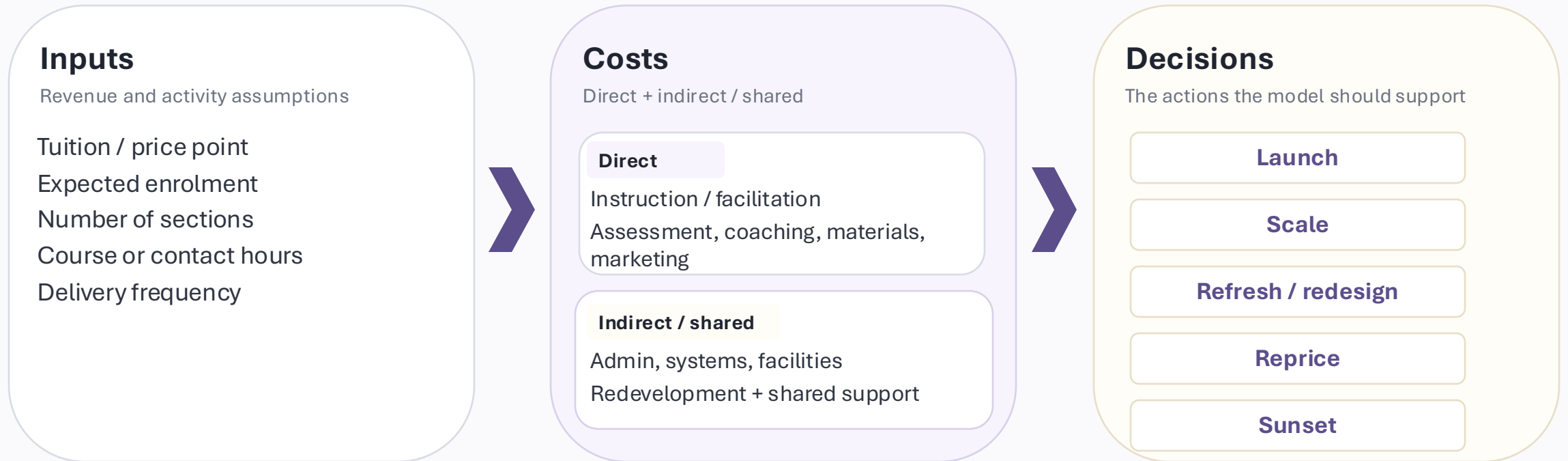
- Admin support
- LMS / platforms
- Facilities
- Shared services
- Ongoing redevelopment

Decisions

- **Launch**
- **Scale**
- **Refresh**
- **Reprice**
- **Sunset**

The all-in costing framework

A simple flow: what goes in, what it costs, and what choices it should inform.



Key point: Better visibility leads to better portfolio decisions.

How WCS applied it

The model shaped portfolio discipline, not just spreadsheets.

Observed shift

WCS used the framework to look closely at frequency, demand, profitability, and where older offers were consuming capacity.

Lessons learned

- You do not need a perfect enterprise model on day one.
- You need enough visibility to improve the next round of decisions.
- It's iterative.

What the model changed

The model became a way to evaluate the portfolio, not just a way to cost individual sections.

We did not simply add more

- Only a small number of new courses and sections were added.
- Growth came from tightening the mix, not expanding indiscriminately.

We reviewed the existing portfolio

- Course frequency
- True contribution
- Legacy sections that should be sunset or refreshed
- Resource alignment

We used the model to support decisions

- Where to invest
- Where to reprice
- Where to redesign
- Where to stop

Mini case: when “profitable” was not actually profitable

Worksheet example on your tables.

Example course:

Arts, Culture and Religion

What the old view suggested

- Strong enrolment
- Surplus after direct instructional costs
- Looks safe to keep running

What the all-in view showed

- Support burden was high
- Redevelopment load was ongoing
- **Shared costs changed the true profitability picture**

Net Outcomes Without All-In Costing

Course Name	Course Fee (\$)	Enrollment	Gross Revenue	Instructor Salary	Net Revenue	Net Margin
Art Appreciation						
ACLT6235-005 - Understanding Western Art: From t	\$ 245.00	10	\$ 2,327.50	\$ 1,305.07	\$ 1,022.43	44%
ACLT6236-003 - Exploring Renaissance Art of the 1!	\$ 245.00	19	\$ 4,471.25	\$ 1,305.07	\$ 3,166.18	71%
ACLT6203-003 - Women Artists of the 16th-20th Ce	\$ 245.00	5	\$ 1,188.25	\$ 1,305.07	-\$ 116.82	-10%

Net Outcomes With All-In Costing

Course Name	Course Fee	Enroll	Gross Revenue	Instructor Salary	Direct Costs	Indirect Costs	Net Revenue
Art Appreciation							
ACLT6235-005 - Understanding We	\$ 245.00	10	\$ 2,327.50	\$ 1,305.07	\$ 585.99	\$ 5,428.26	-\$ 4,991.83
ACLT6236-003 - Exploring Renaiss	\$ 245.00	19	\$ 4,471.25	\$ 1,305.07	\$ 585.99	\$ 5,428.26	-\$ 2,848.08
ACLT6203-003 - Women Artists of t	\$ 245.00	5	\$ 1,188.25	\$ 1,305.07	\$ 585.99	\$ 5,428.26	-\$ 6,131.08

Test It Out

Worksheet example on your tables.

Simple walkthrough structure

- 1 Start with revenue assumptions.
- 2 Subtract direct costs.
- 3 Layer in indirect/shared costs.
- 4 Compare the apparent margin to the sustainable contribution.
- 5 Discuss the actual decision: reprice, redesign, refresh, or sunset.

Test It Out

Worksheet example on your tables.

05:00



5 minutes

0

PART 4

How to apply this on your campus

Start with one program, one worksheet, and one better conversation.

The goal is not a giant exercise in accounting. The goal is a repeatable decision framework that is “accurate enough” to improve choices.

Table Activity: Map One Offering

Apply the model to one program you run today

Worksheet prompts

- What is hardest to cost or estimate?
- What did you realize you were not considering before?
- How would fuller indirect costing change the picture?
- What decision changes:
 - **launch, price, frequency, redesign, or sunset?**

Debrief Worksheet

- Discuss what to do with the information and findings
- Where do mission, politics, or strategy override margin?
- What is the best next move?
 - refresh, reprice, refocus, subsidize, reuse, or sunset?

One caution: Don't Cut Everything in the Red

Portfolio decisions must consider overhead, mission, timing, and reinvestment capacity.

Margin alone is not enough for portfolio decisions

What happens if you cut too bluntly

- Shared overhead doesn't disappear.
- Remaining programs absorb more cost.
- Lose capacity to redevelop or launch new offerings.
- Can weaken the wider portfolio.

Better questions to ask

- Is this offering core to mission or strategy?
- Can it be repriced or tested before cancellation?
- Can its assets be reused elsewhere?
- Can other funding sources support it?
- How much surplus should be reinvested in development?

Thank You!

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Closing discussion

Profitability is not about popularity. It is about sustainable contribution.

Guided discussion questions:

- Will you use some version of this model?
- What direct or indirect costs were new for you?
- How do you currently assess program viability?
- What would you change first when you return to campus?

Thank you

Chris Smith | Morgan Bender | Western Continuing Studies