

The Liberal Arts Experience: A Perspective from NSSE

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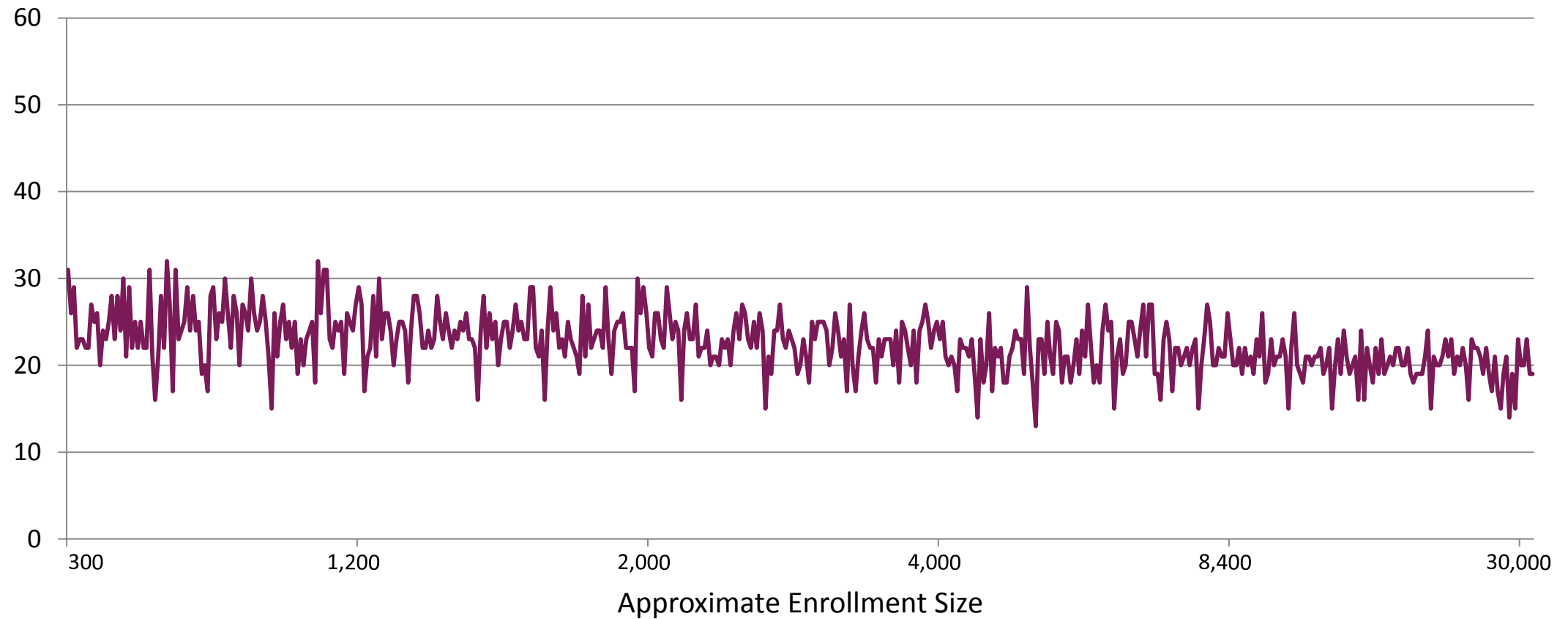
How do average NSSE Student-Faculty Interaction scores vary by size and Liberal Arts classification?

Student-Faculty Interaction scores are based on answers to:

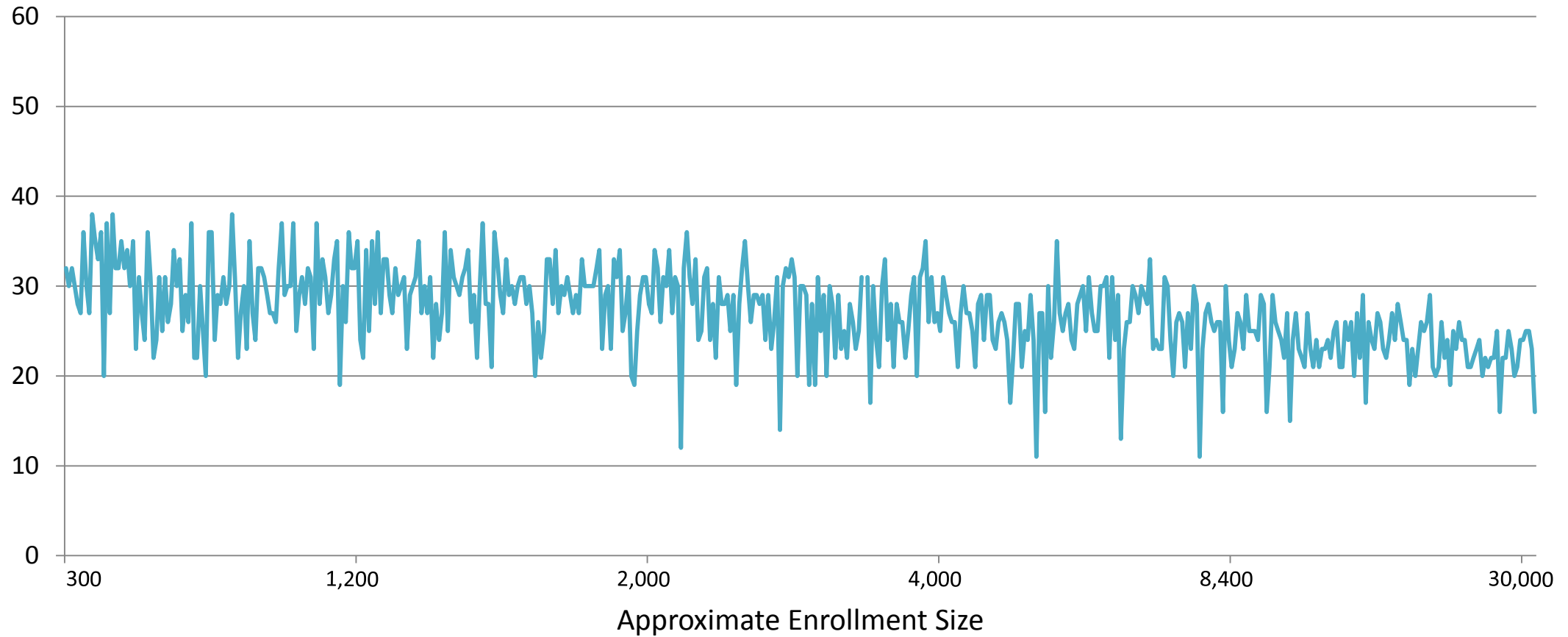
- *During the current school year, how often have you:*
 - Talked about career plans with a faculty member
 - Worked with a faculty member on activities other than coursework (committees, student groups, etc.)
 - Discussed course topics, ideas, or concepts with a faculty member outside of class
 - Discussed your academic performance with a faculty member

[Very often / Often / Sometimes / Never]

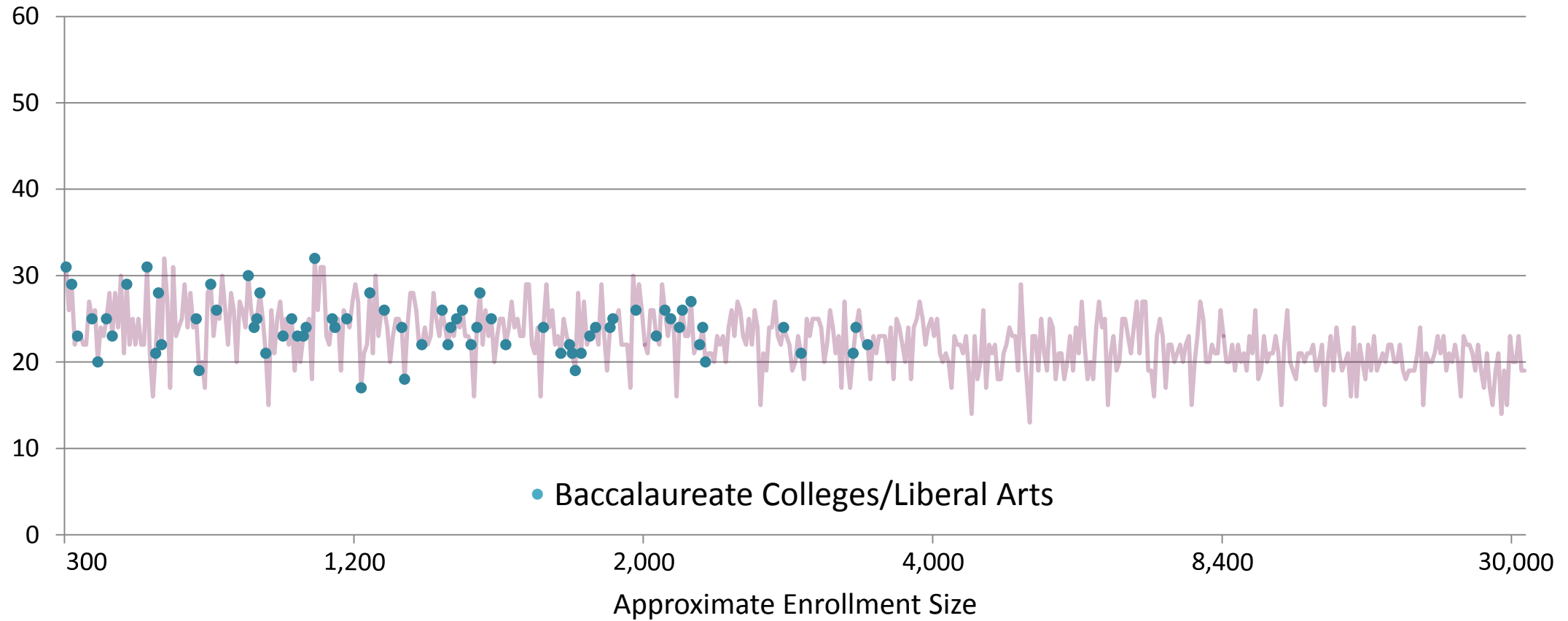
NSSE 2015 Average Student-Faculty Interaction by Enrollment Size, First-Year Students



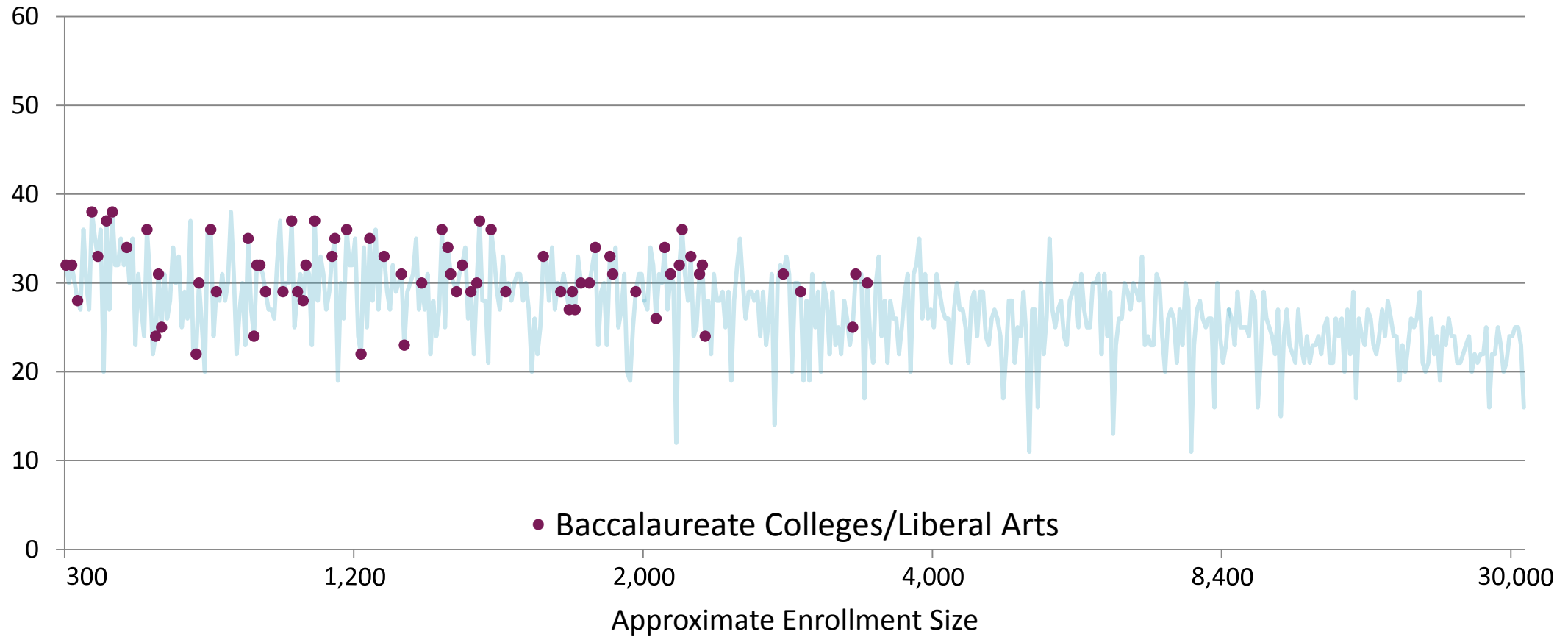
NSSE 2015 Average Student-Faculty Interaction by Enrollment Size, Seniors



NSSE 2015 Average Student-Faculty Interaction by Enrollment Size, First-Year Students



NSSE 2015 Average Student-Faculty Interaction by Enrollment Size, Seniors



The Liberal Arts Experience

Charles Blaich & Kathleen Wise

Advocates' conversations about liberal arts colleges often start with this comparison:

*The ideal of
what liberal arts
colleges do at
their best*

vs.

*Straw–person
versions of teaching
and learning at other
kinds of institutions*

Typological Thinking versus Population Thinking

Typological thinking no doubt had its roots in the earliest efforts of primitive man to classify the bewildering diversity of nature into categories...Since there is no gradation between types, gradual evolution is basically a logical impossibility for the typologist. Evolution, if it occurs at all, has to proceed in steps or jumps...The assumptions of population thinking are diametrically opposed to those of the typologist. The populationist stresses the uniqueness of everything in the organic world...All organisms and organic phenomena are composed of unique features and can be described collectively only in statistical terms...Averages are merely statistical abstractions, only the individuals of which the populations are composed have reality. The ultimate conclusions of the population thinker and of the typologist are precisely the opposite. For the typologist, the type is real and the variation an illusion, while for the populationist the type (average) is an abstraction and only the variation is real. No two ways of looking at nature could be more different.

– *Ernst Mayr (1959)*

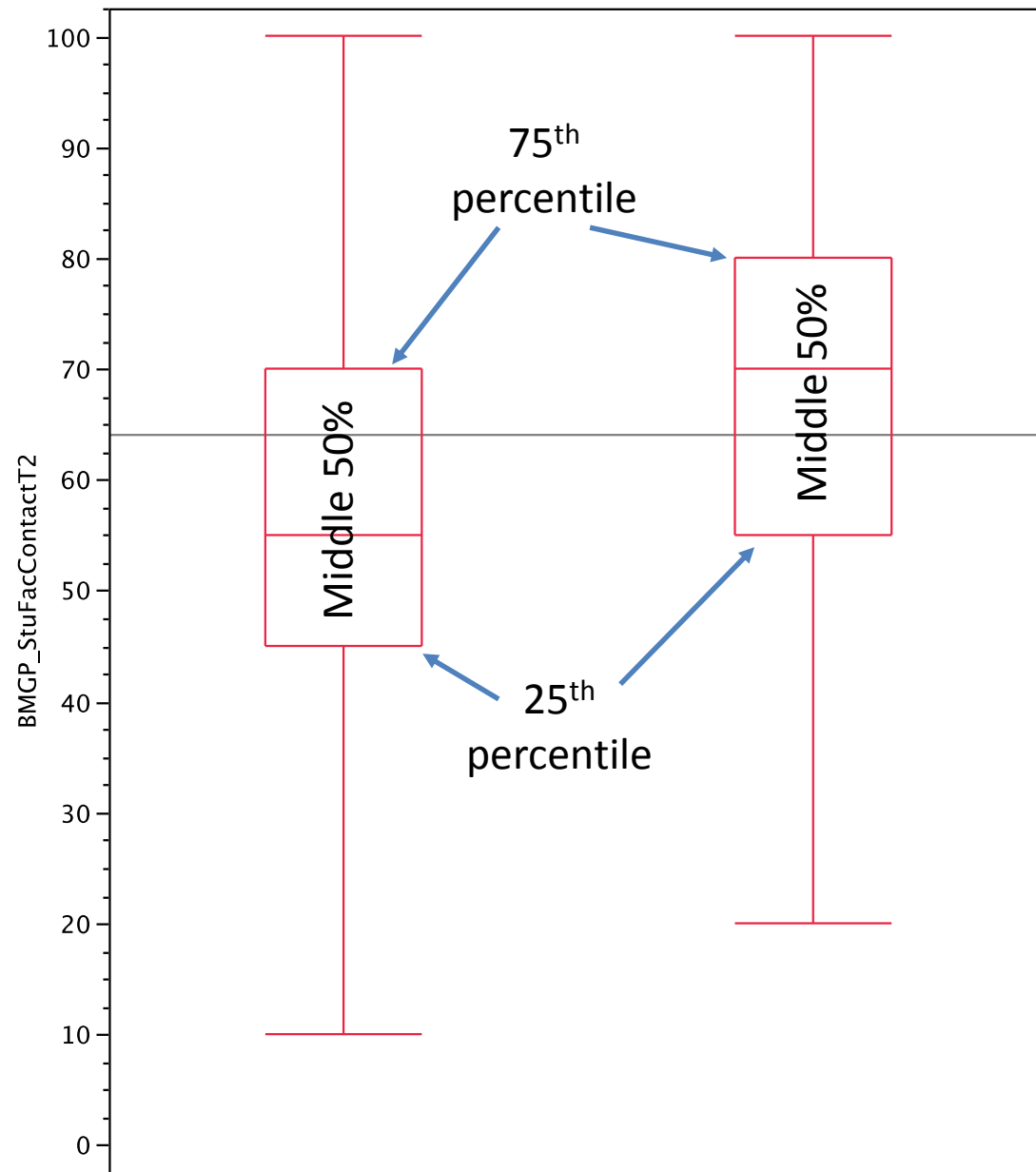
The principle advantage of liberal arts colleges is the quality of the learning and teaching environment

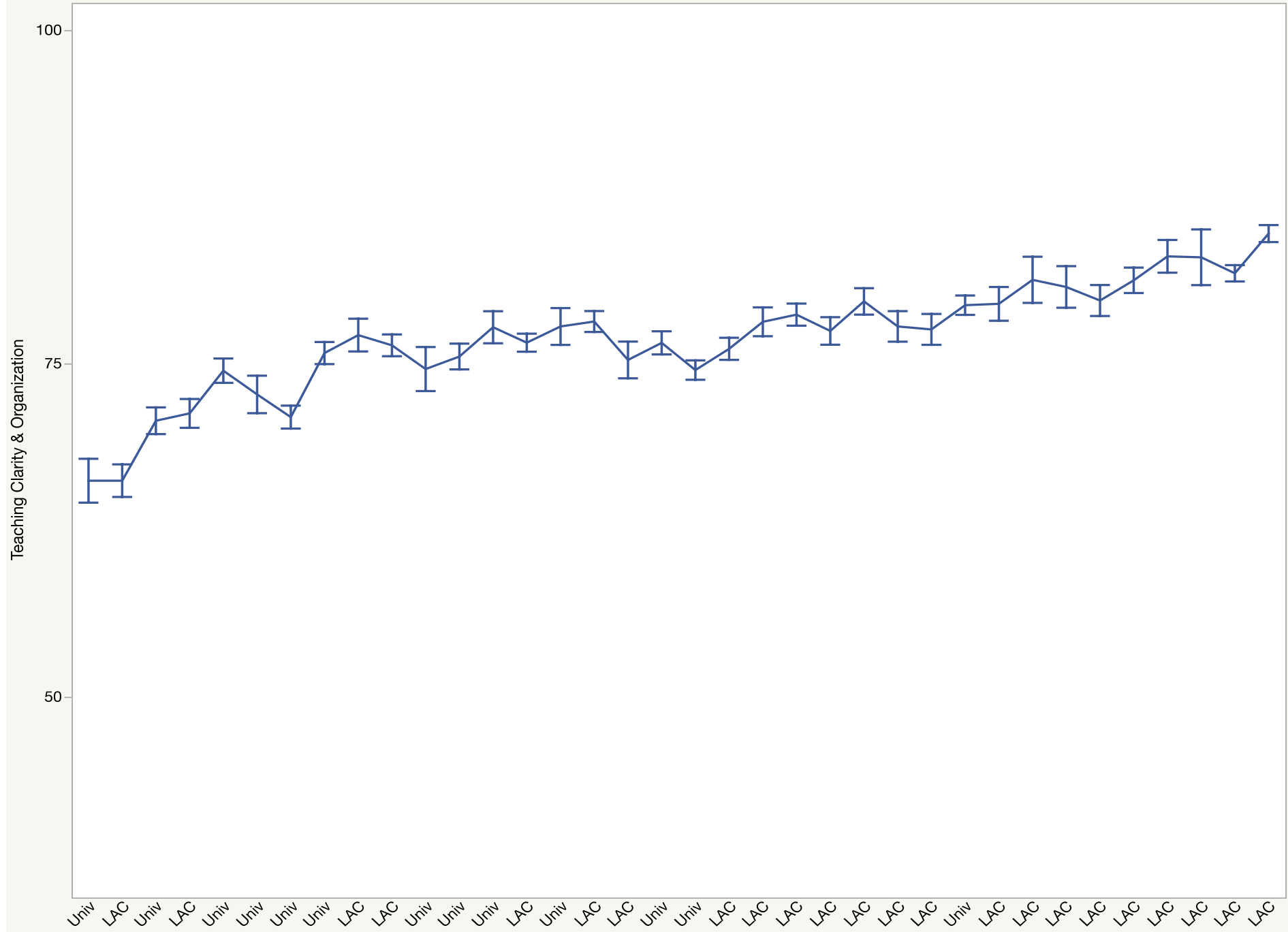
Pascarella, Wang, Trolan, & Blaich (2013). How the instructional and learning environments of liberal arts colleges enhance cognitive development. *Higher Education, 66(5)*, 569-583.

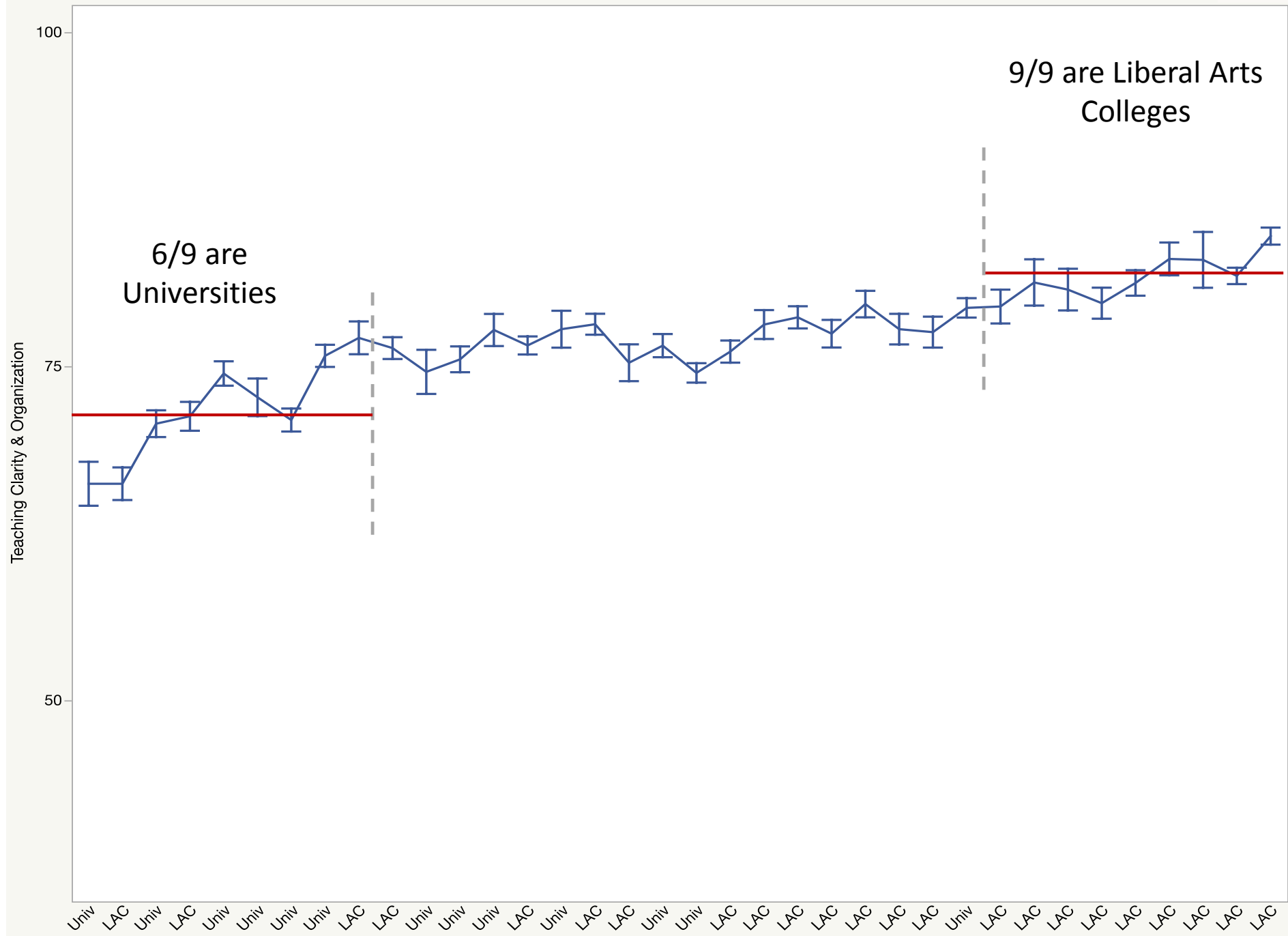
Liberal Arts College Advantage (from research)

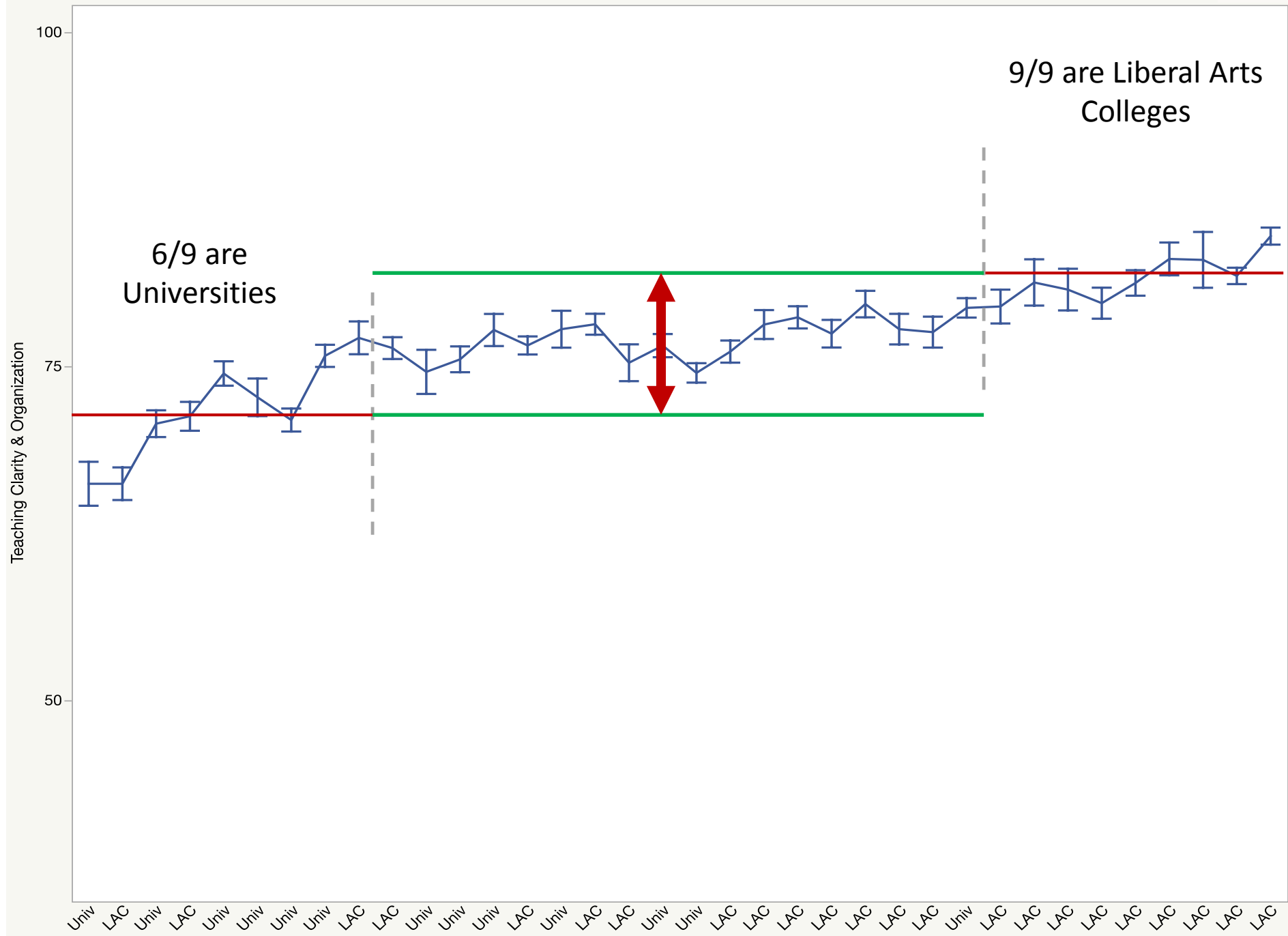
- With extensive controls in place
 - Students at liberal arts colleges gained more on critical thinking and the interest in engaging in difficult intellectual activity than students at other other kinds of institutions
 - Students at liberal arts colleges also experienced high levels of teaching clarity and organization, and deep approaches to learning (NSSE)
- However, once we take the differences in teaching clarity and organization and deep approaches to learning into account, there is no difference in the impact of liberal arts colleges on critical thinking and the need for cognition
- In other words, the difference in the quality of the teaching and learning environment explains the differential impact of liberal arts colleges

How consistent are these differences?

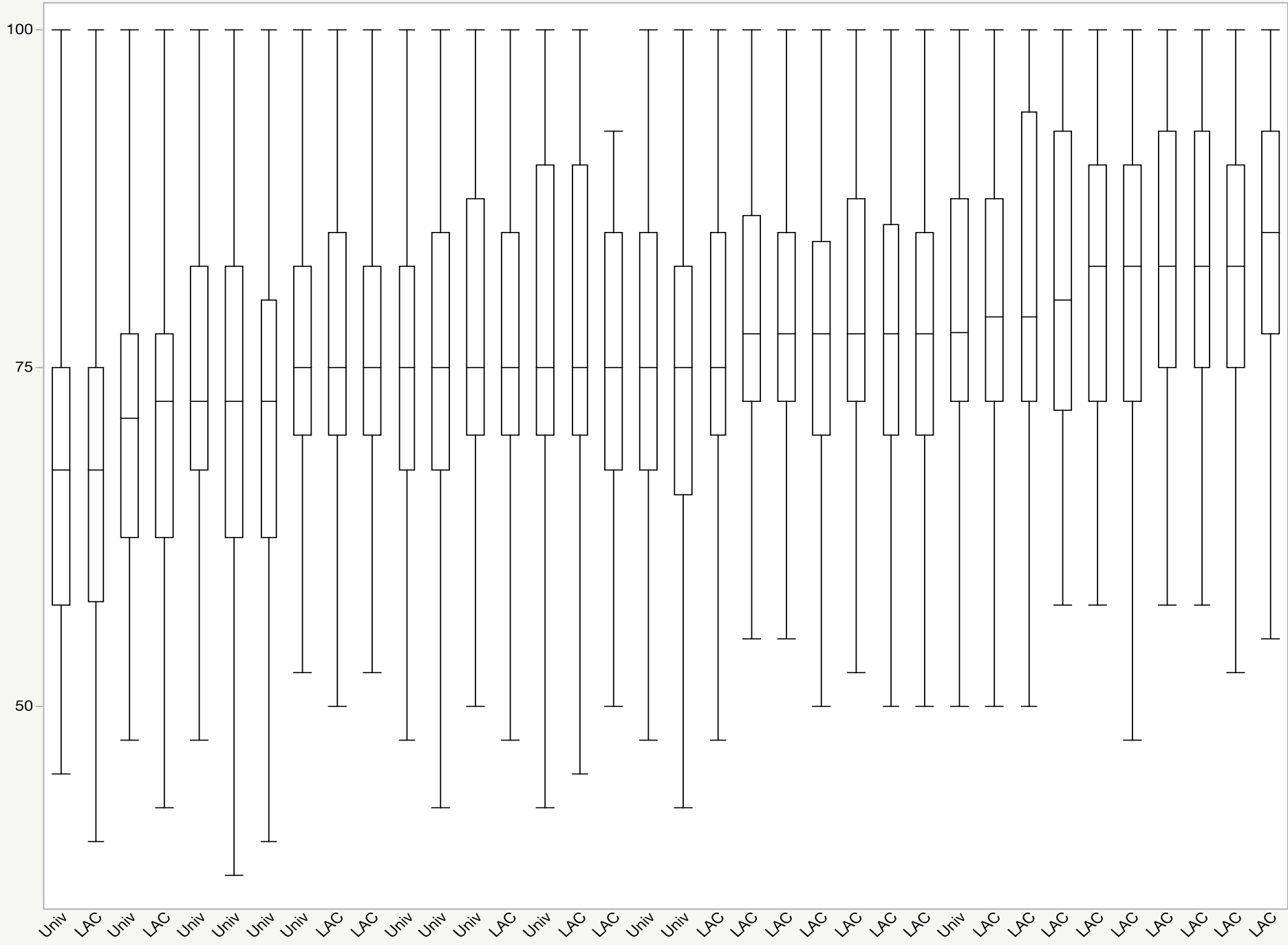


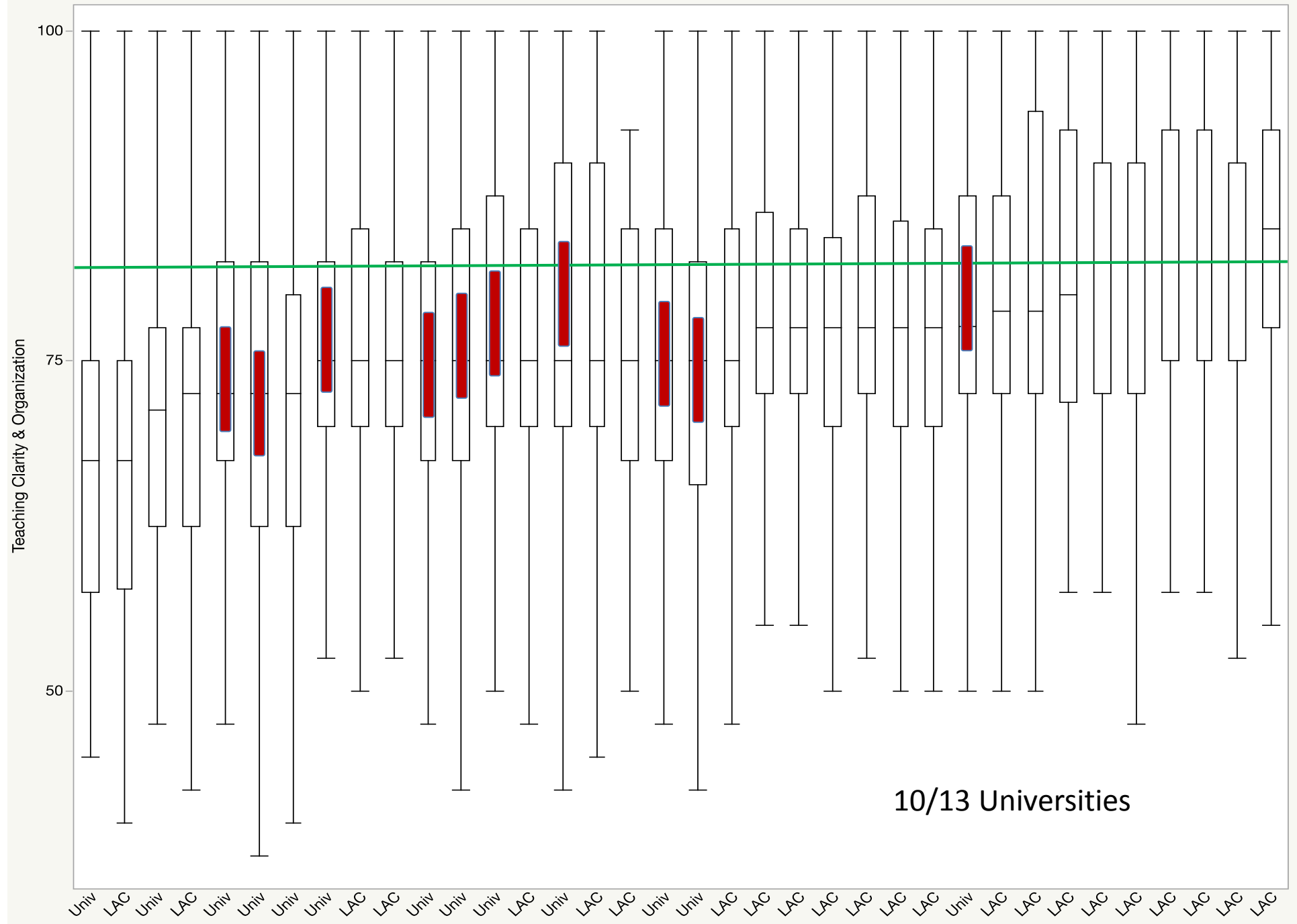


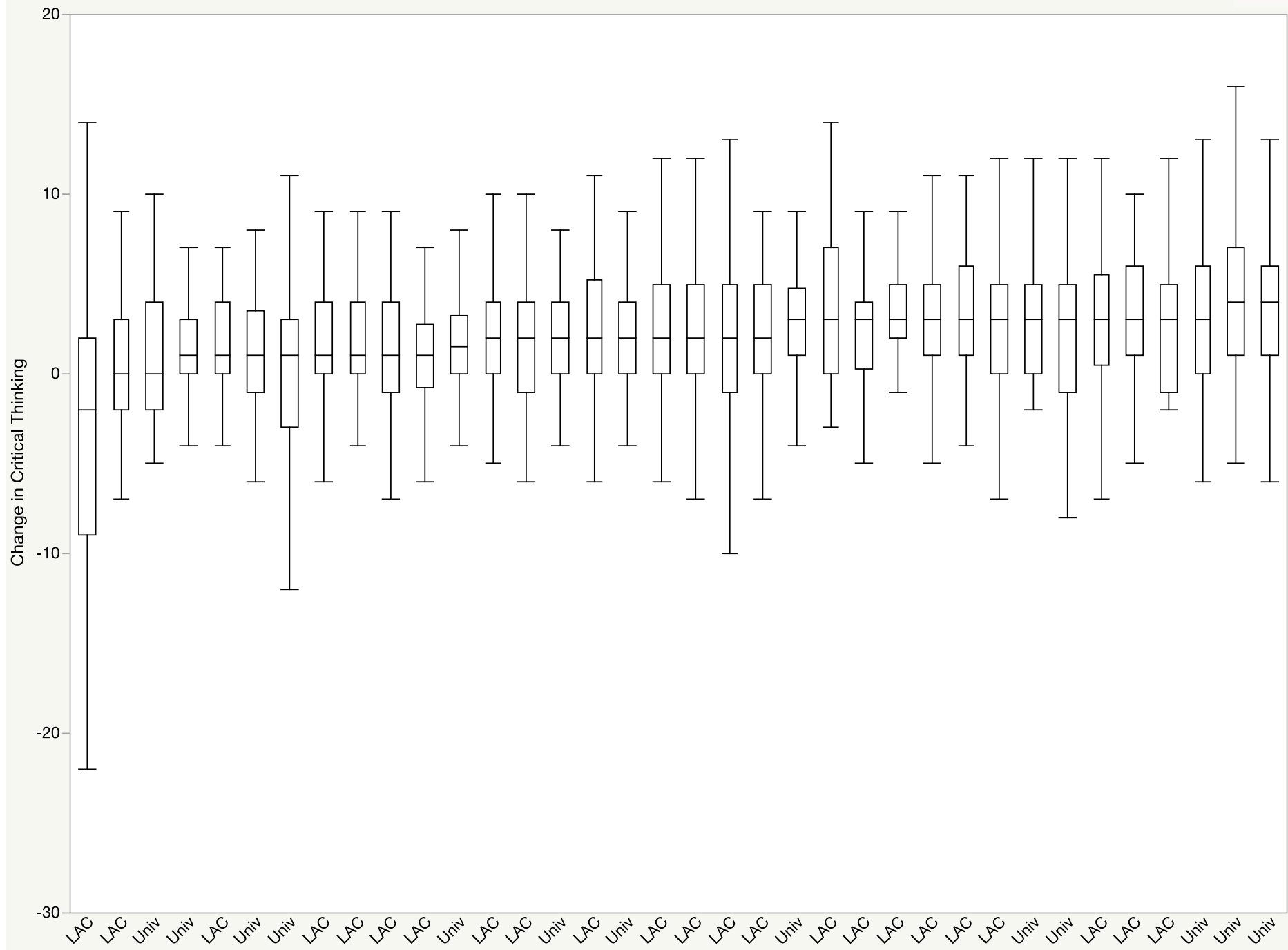


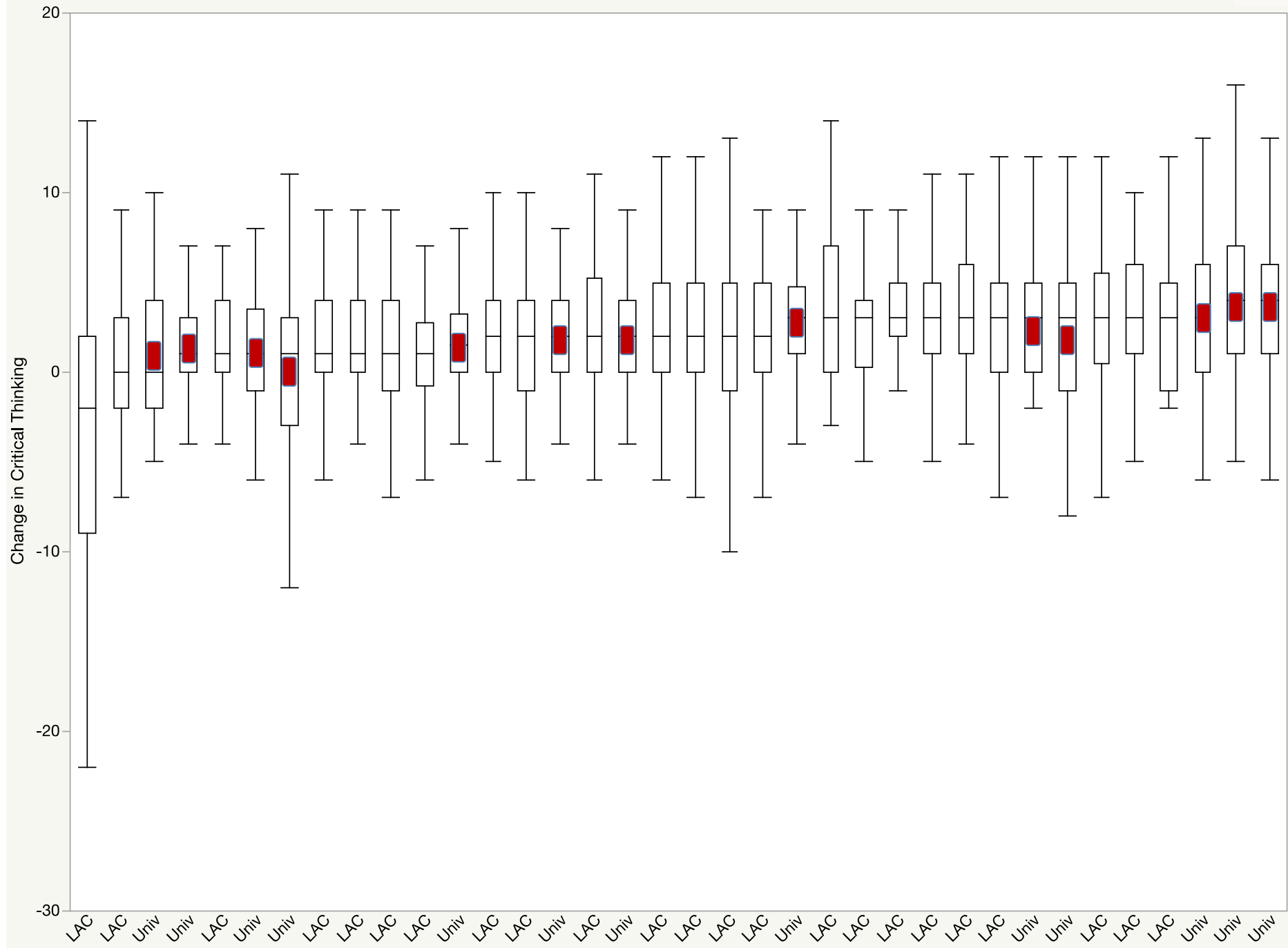


Teaching Clarity & Organization









Liberal Arts College Advantages

- Powerful teaching and learning environment with exceptional potential
 - Small class sizes
 - Environments that are suited to supporting high-quality interactions between students, staff, and faculty
 - Focus on undergraduate education
- Historical commitment to educating the broad qualities of hearts and minds of undergraduate students in an intimate and supportive environment

Liberal Arts College Disadvantages

- Teaching well is damn hard
- Implicit belief that the “power of place” rules
 - “We don’t need a Teaching and Learning Center. This whole college is a Teaching and Learning Center.”
 - “We hire good researchers because a new faculty member can learn to be a good teacher by their 4th or 5th year, but they can’t learn to be good scholars in that same amount of time.”
 - “Yes, we teach intro bio by lecturing to 80 students in an auditorium, but it’s much more effective here because the bio faculty are in lab with the students...except when the senior TA runs the lab.”
- The belief that scholarship in a discipline is the most legitimate form of intellectual engagement
- The ever present straw-person

Final question – Suppose that you are choosing between two different institutions. A liberal arts college and a state university. Both institutions offer study abroad, internships, undergraduate research, first-year seminars, and theme-based living units. You've learned that on a number of measures, students at the liberal arts college grow about 5-10% more on learning outcomes. But the liberal arts college costs \$10,000 more this year, and a good chunk of the students at the state university grow just as much on the learning outcomes as the students at the liberal arts college. Which would you choose?

Did we mention that the state university has huge football and basketball games? As well as multiple Starbucks, good shopping, and many more choices in student clubs, activities, and majors...