

# Lessons from a Change Process

By Catherine Armour and Randy Bass

Design often begins with a conflict or tension. At Georgetown University in Washington, DC, the efforts at the heart of the Designing the Future(s) of the University initiative began with three important challenges facing higher education. First, like all colleges and universities, we are concerned with the unsustainable rising cost of higher education. Yet, we know that with the explosion of online and web-based resources for learning, the value of institutions of higher education will increasingly involve high-impact interaction with faculty, mentored learning, and experiential education—the most cost-intensive forms of learning. Second, we recognize that many of the emerging innovations afforded by the new digital ecosystem, such as analytics-driven adaptive learning systems, and modular and personalized learning, are by themselves highly disaggregating and at odds with what we believe about the value of an integrative vision of education. Finally, as a research-intensive university, we are acutely aware that although teaching and research are interdependent, they can also create dissonance between how faculty spend their time and what the institution rewards.

These conflicts and tensions motivate our process as they lead us to try and reimagine Georgetown for the next 10 to 15 years, while strengthening what we believe about student learning and higher education's role in serving the world.

## The Red House

The Designing the Future(s) of the University initiative was launched late in the fall of 2013. Shortly thereafter, Provost Robert M. Groves released *Five Pump-Priming Ideas*, an invitation to the university to innovate in classrooms, degree program design, structural re-creations, and process reforms that would challenge our constraints and norms. The purpose was not to disrupt our core practices so much as to generate variations in them.

One of the most important features of the Future(s) initiative, whose home is a small red clapboard house at the edge of campus, was that it be funded solely by philanthropy. The initiative has raised an initial investment of approximately \$5 million.



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## Generating Variations in Our Model

The first Future(s) pilot projects generally originated from faculty teams, often interdisciplinary, reaching across areas of study and schools. Each of the pilots was designed to be a small but game-changing experiment. Here are three examples:

### **RETHINKING THE STANDARD SEMESTER COURSE: Challenges in Early Childhood and Society**

This model was developed by a cross-campus team from the Medical Center and the Department of Psychology. The pilot is a collection of modular one-credit learning experiences bundled into a course called Challenges in Childhood and Society, based on a holistic view of child development. The design involves four kinds of malleable learning modules: theory, practice (at community sites), policy, and topical. Students start with the theory module; afterward they can take any combination of modules in any order, over one semester or more. This new modular, collaborative, learning-focused approach addresses a range of problems—including the complexities of involving Medical Center faculty in undergraduate teaching—and provides a new model for experimentation in other contexts.

### **RETHINKING SUMMER: Social Justice Intersections**

Summers are increasingly a time when students engage in meaningful experience, but often without mentorship or the opportunity for real-time integration with curricular learning. The Social Justice Intersections course, developed by the Center for

Social Justice, has created a new model of course typology to serve our students, who fan out around the globe on social justice immersion projects. The online course “wraps” a series of two-week skills modules with an eight-week overarching structure guiding weekly reflection with the cohort around the world. Integrating experience, reflection, and skills and knowledge development, the course provides a model that can be expanded to a large number of students in a whole range of experiential settings. An example of the latter includes the extension of this model to an online summer program serving first-generation students in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) disciplines, helping to bridge their first and second years.

### **RETHINKING THE TRANSITION FROM STUDENT TO GRADUATE: Bridge Courses**

In spring 2017 we will launch a pilot set of courses designed for eighth-semester seniors and young alumni who have graduated within the previous five years. The project responds to data showing that the number of students taking less than a full-time load in their final semester has doubled in five years. The Bridge Courses are intended to meet the needs of graduating seniors both to synthesize and make sense of their four years, as well as to look forward to the kinds of professional skills that will help them succeed in the workplace and their next phase of life. We discovered the latter category was as relevant to our young alumni as to our graduating seniors. The initial pilot includes courses ranging from Storytelling and Effective Communication



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to Financial Literacy. The Bridge Courses project represents our first concrete effort to blur the line between the traditional eight-semester degree and an arc of learning into adulthood.

## Emerging Patterns and Lessons Learned

A few core rules for this innovation work have emerged. First, every project has to push against some structural constraint (the 15-week semester, the credit hour, the nine-month calendar, etc.) and test variations of it. Second, projects cannot be idiosyncratic or depend on the particular interests of one talented faculty member; they have to be pilots from which we can generalize and which we might apply to other scenarios or problems. Lastly, we only fund a Red House project for one year (or the equivalent); after that, if a project is to survive, it has to be absorbed into the curriculum and faculty workload.

Beyond these basic rules we have also learned some valuable lessons about the viability of experimental and creative curricular work in a culture designed for deliberative shared governance and slow change:

- We developed strong stakeholder involvement as part of our iterative design process—one that frequently included associate deans, the registrar, compliance officers, and financial aid representatives—early in each project’s development. Likewise, we communicated well and regularly with our board, alumni, and donors.
- We do not give ourselves as good a grade on continuous communications with faculty. Early on there were many open invitations and speaker events, and a drumbeat of updates. As the work became more intense and demanding, we focused inward, and neglected to continue to reach back out to this important community. We learned it is absolutely critical to spiral communications outward, and to be as inclusive and open as possible, especially as the work takes specific shape within a core group.
- Very early on we should have established a formal faculty review and approval process for Red House pilots. We assumed we would work within the Curriculum Committee approval structures, long established for important reasons, but which do not in the end benefit a research and development initiative. Last year, a Designing the Future(s) Advisory Committee

was created, with the sole mission of approving and monitoring innovation projects. This system is now working very well; it might have accelerated progress if it had been instituted earlier.

## The Immediate Horizon

The purpose of Designing the Future(s) has always been to generate provocative pilot projects that would authorize and motivate widespread creative thinking in existing and mainstream programs. As a university, we are indeed beginning to see that effect, as departments and whole units are starting to consider different kinds of curricular innovations. As we move ahead, we recognize that the role of the Red House is not only to foster innovation but to tell that story of innovation and emerging practice across the university.

This also has bearing on what the questions we might ask about metrics of success. Are we generating variations that shift what the community sees as viable in terms of course and program design? Are we improving the context for curricular innovation? Are we helping to change the conversation? This movement has to be matched by system-level policy discussions. We are therefore complementing the pilot work with campus-level policy discussions around expanding the measures by which we count teaching effort, policies on summer academic credit and tuition, and the ways dollars move across boundaries and are counted in relation to FTEs. Effort at each of these levels is vital to a successful change process—creative pilots and new practices, policies and structures—all aligned with each other and in synch with the institution’s most cherished values. ■



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