• Georgetown University’s Designing the Future(s) Initiative combines top-down permission from the President’s Office with grassroots efforts of faculty and staff to create curricular innovations. Its director, Vice Provost for Education Randy Bass, has designed a system-wide and multi-level method for change within a legacy institution.

• Future(s)’ core change method is to rearrange the building blocks and institutional levers at Georgetown that will affect the student experience. Its projects switch up credit hours, learning methods, and course duration, and Future(s)’ motto is that every project has to break at least one rule of traditional higher education.

• Future(s)’ major projects include an interdisciplinary core curriculum pathway called “Core Pathways,” one-unit courses for seniors, and a course prefix called UNXD, which allows Future(s) to design, develop, and run alternative courses for students.
For more than a hundred years, a university education has been structured more or less the same way. Disciplines are divided by department and students follow a core curriculum or set of general education requirements before choosing a major and taking classes that fall within that specific discipline.

The seeming inflexibility of such structures could appear insurmountable for those itching to change the student learning experience, but to Randy Bass, they posed an enticing systems puzzle. Randy sees the institution as a set of building blocks that, when arranged in new ways, can reshape the student experience without requiring a ground-up reconstruction of the institution.

While he is now Vice Provost for Education, Randy has seen the institution from many vantage points, including as a faculty member, as the founder of Georgetown’s center for teaching, learning, and technology innovation, and in a variety of other roles throughout the university.

Five years ago, Georgetown decided to respond to the narrative around universities like Georgetown that they were “old, privileged, and don’t want to change.” Randy’s experience told him that Georgetown needed to change—but it had to happen in a way that didn’t feel threatening.

So he decided to prioritize areas where there would be less resistance, in the hopes that those changes could drive further innovation throughout the university. His mission was to start a variety of different projects that would each break one rule of a traditional higher education experience. The goal? To see what was possible and ultimately, reinvent the status quo. This approach was supported entirely by philanthropy, mostly from alumni, which gave the initiative more freedom than it would have had if funded internally.
Randy conceptualizes his work through ‘slow-change’ and ‘fast-change’ strategies, a concept based on the language and ideas from Daniel Kahneman’s book *Thinking Fast and Slow*.

“Every campus needs both in dialogue,” Randy explains. While someone like him might want to tackle innovation quickly, he knows that it must be done hand in hand with slow change, so that it’s more palatable to the institution. But most campuses don’t have a mechanism for “fast change,” which is what this work became.

He also looked for inspiration outside of traditional private and selective universities. Large research public universities and community colleges provided him with ideas of how to innovate, that he translated in a way that fits with Georgetown’s context.

With the benefit of hindsight, Randy describes what has become the Designing the Future(s) of the University Initiative as going through three distinct phases.

The first phase he calls the “let’s move fast and break things phase.”

“During that period, we were uncritical and exuberant, taking the approach that everything we could think of would be worth launching,” he says. “We thought that rolling out every boundary-pushing idea would be the right approach, so the MO became, ‘hang out the shingle, send out the provocative document, and bring us your craziest ideas.’”

The result? A lot of little projects running at once: breaking up the standard one-size-fits-all semester, modular courses, academic credits that wrapped around experiential learning, studio-based learning, and more. Although Randy and his team tried a number of different things, they never got a complete degree-level pilot off the ground, in part because it was moving too fast. After two and a half years, they hit a ceiling with the approach of working with faculty who brought in their own ideas.

They realized they needed to try something new.

For the second phase, Future(s) took a different approach, launching fewer programs that were larger in scale. The idea, Randy explains, was to create a structure and invite faculty to join in to reinvent and reimagine what the structure would look like. “We wanted to create something that was attractive, that people would want to join. It’s been two years and the programs have been largely successful.”
For decades, Georgetown hadn’t done a full-scale revision of its core curriculum: general education requirements remained constant, although targeted additions and changes were made over the years. But there was little savor for taking on a large-scale revision of the whole program. Randy and the Future(s) team stepped in, creating Core Pathways—an alternative to Georgetown’s traditional core curriculum that students can opt into. Core Pathways currently focuses on climate change: every class a student takes as part of Core Pathways touches on the issue in some way.

Instead of treating these courses as disparate and distinct classes, Core Pathways brings learning and disciplines around a central theme. Students take two modules that are 1.5 credits each over a semester, which are taught by a different professor in a particular discipline, such as the theology of climate change and the literature of the Anthropocene.

Faculty work together in an interdisciplinary way, and students are exposed to a subject from a number of different points of view. Core Pathways also includes an experiential learning component: all students who take it come together on a monthly basis for Integrative Days, participating in a real world challenge or scenario that has to do with climate change. They bring to bear the knowledge acquired in their classes into an interdisciplinary project or practice-based setting.

There are two different types of Bridge Courses: those that revisit the core curriculum, and those that prepare students with tools for life after university. The former gives seniors an opportunity to take a class in a discipline or with a professor that they may not have otherwise had access to.

Future(s) works with professors who teach standout or popular courses and redesigns them to be a one-credit class that are available to students outside the department. For instance, the Future(s) team worked with Terry Reynolds, a professor in the theology department, to translate his class on Freud and the conception of the divine into a Bridge Course called “Freud and the Good Life.”

The second category of classes gives students an opportunity to learn real-life skills in the classroom, such as negotiation or personal finance, that they may not learn in their academic courses.

UNXD (University Cross-Disciplinary) Future(s) has its own course designation and implementation process, so the team doesn’t have to run classes through another department, thereby directly impacting Georgetown’s curriculum. UNXD, or “University Cross-Disciplinary” courses are just for Future(s)-supported classes. To get this designation, the course must be interdisciplinary, innovative, and new.

Historically, new classes were added to the course catalog by going through the department’s or school’s approval process, which included reviewing the syllabus and deciding whether the class should be added. Future(s) courses initially went through much the same process—but rather than getting committee approval from just one school, any given course would have to be approved by all four undergraduate schools.

Georgetown’s main faculty governance structures streamlined this by establishing a single Future(s) Advisory Committee that approves Future(s) courses. Now there are two straightforward ways to develop a UNXD course.

First, a faculty member in any department brings a fully fleshed out idea for a course and syllabus to Future(s) that would not otherwise work in their department.

Second, a multi-stakeholder team starts with a problem and brainstorms solutions to address it. For example, to create the Mastering the Hidden Curriculum course, the director, student leaders, and staff from the Georgetown Scholars Program, together with the Future(s) team developed a course to support first-generation Georgetown freshmen from the curricular side as they navigate
the university. They co-developed the syllabus and course readings and found professors who were eager to teach the course. This work yielded a one-credit seminar offered in the fall semester that targets first generation, low-income students, and bolsters the overall support network of the Georgetown Scholars Program.

“Core Pathways was a really tangible way for me to actually create something that has a lasting legacy,” says student and rising junior Leslie Telleria. “As a student, it’s exciting and enticing—[Core Pathways] gives you autonomy and ownership of your school. Not only do I go to Georgetown, but I’m a part of it.”

Randy points to a number of necessary ingredients for the success he and his team have seen.

First, they needed to identify the building blocks or pieces that had to be in place to get the project off the ground. Because this had never been done before, Randy emphasized clearly defining these steps, ensuring that they could iterate without “rocking the curricular boat.” For Georgetown, these building blocks included: credits, modules, normalizing new genres of courses, and then assigning credits to experiential learning.

The second key was finding a balance between doing something small enough in scope and scale that the faculty would feel comfortable with the pilot going forward, and boundary-pushing enough to really make an impact.

Finally, none of it would have been possible without stakeholder buy-in and involvement. The team developed a faculty governance group that includes representatives from every department and the members of the group review and approve every project that come through the Designing the Future(s) of the University Initiative. The projects could only run as a pilot, and eventually become part of the curriculum, with this approval. The team also brought in the registrar, advising deans, people from the financial aid office, and those responsible for accreditation to ensure that their perspectives were incorporated in the agile design process.

Randy readily admits that his own position within the university has been key to the initiative’s overall success. As Vice Provost for Education, the board, president, and provost all asked him to lead this disruptive work—“it’s not just a handful of faculty members making trouble on the side,” he notes. This gives the project validity, allowing Randy to implement the ideas and changes that the team has generated.

The Future(s) team has now reached its third phase: thinking about and having an impact on the entire campus ecosystem. The Whole Curriculum Framework, which is a driving concept of the third phase, is about integration. It connects the co-curricular with the academic curricular.
core and aligns the work of the two such that the term “curriculum” encompasses it all.

“What kind of thinking, planning, designing, and executing can we do if we think of the curriculum and the co-curriculum as a single whole curriculum?” Randy asks. “How would that change our thinking?” It’s not so much about drastically changing what exists, but instead about bringing the disparate parts together.

Many universities have maxed out their ability to construct more buildings and enroll more students. Scaling can’t continue to happen this way. So Randy wants Georgetown to bring the co-curricular into the academic fold, allowing the institution to scale, improve, and intensify using only existing resources.

With the co-curriculum thriving, Randy sees an opportunity to integrate it with the academic curriculum. For example, rather than looking at the curriculum through the lens of disciplines, Randy hopes that the university will consider dispositions and ways of thinking and doing. This goes beyond academic subjects and incorporates competencies, abilities, and capacities—especially those that students may develop outside of the classroom as well.

Whole Curriculum seeks to streamline a student’s experience so they can better plan and personalize their degree. It’s also more equitable. As long as many essential experiences—such as internships—sit outside the credit-bearing model, the more it advantages the already advantaged. There needs to be increased dialogue between centers, the academic core of the university, and the co-curricular, Randy believes.

But Randy knows his work—and that of the higher ed system isn’t done.

Randy has observed over the last 30-40 years that higher ed has spent millions investing in and developing this rich co-curriculum, from service learning to study abroad to entrepreneurship initiatives to a whole range of student support programs around inclusion and diversity. In the next 30 years, Randy believes institutions will need to focus on this effort of bringing the curricular and co-curricular together.

“I think of it as a kind of fundamental condition of most universities,” Randy says. “I don’t think the model is broken, but it is hyper-extended. Being hyper-extended means that it is very difficult to improve opportunities for transformative learning without making education more inequitable and even less affordable.”

This will require finding innovative ways to continue evolving the learning experience that are not premised simply on expansion. In this context, innovation cannot be separated from equity and affordability.

Many of the resources that schools need are already at their fingertips. “On most campuses, these resources already exist in centers that don’t think of themselves as part of the academic curriculum,” Randy says. “So how do you rewire those relationships to help the school see the centers as a resource, and their staff as educators, for delivery of academic programs, and help the centers see that they can come in from the margins?” These co-curricular components are “actually part of the instructional neural network that allows us to grow as an institution.”
Articulate your values: The team took these ideas to the larger community, engaging faculty, administrators, and even students and identifying areas of alignment and divergence. Then they dug down and identified the university’s values, the barriers to representing those values, and determining what was possible to change.

Break one rule at a time: Randy found that the best way to challenge the status quo at Georgetown was by thinking strategically about the building blocks of the institution. At Georgetown, each pilot broke just one rule, with the hope of eventually creating a tipping point whereby the paradigm would shift, but it wouldn’t feel abrupt for stakeholders.

To do this, Randy gave himself permission to think outside of Georgetown’s existing ‘rules.’ Then he built a team, with whom he worked to figure out which rules are worth changing.

Find your points of influence: Along every step of the way they asked, “what is our power to respond to this?” “what is outside of our power that’s part of the larger institutional structures that are impinging on some of these?” and “how can our unit change?”

Finally, this work isn’t limited to the ‘Randys’ of the world. Even someone who is not an administrator can use these steps to facilitate change. Any faculty member can ask these questions—every person at the university has some piece of the educational mission in their control and that they can improve on or re-imagine.