



Designing a Signature General Education Program

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Notoriously contentious and protracted, efforts to reform general education curricula can prove frustrating for the participants, and they often end in failure. In particular, the goal of producing a signature program—a curriculum that captures the distinctive mission and essence of an institution—often remains elusive, sacrificed to the exigencies of political compromise or financial constraints. The source of the problem usually can be traced to the process involved in a given curricular reform. In its effort to develop a new signature general education curriculum, Salve Regina University was able to avoid many of the usual pitfalls by adopting a formal problem-solving model that emphasizes creativity and involves the entire faculty in the process.

How Does the Process Affect the Outcome?

The problem is not that colleges and universities do not pay attention to process; rather, difficulties arise from their failure to anticipate the results a given process is likely to produce. In designing a signature program, the typical procedure is to appoint a committee to produce a curricular model and then present it to the entire faculty for consideration, debate, and a vote. Great care is taken to ensure that all viewpoints are represented on this committee, in the hope that the final model will produce consensus among the larger faculty. While it seems plausible on the surface, this process is, for a variety of reasons, unlikely to produce a distinctive signature program.

Precisely because they were chosen as representatives, the committee members are concerned to speak

for their constituents' interests—the liberal arts, the professional programs, the humanities or the social sciences, the territory of a single department or discipline. It is the rare faculty member who can transcend his or her own area and speak for the institution as a whole. Thus, this typical process practically guarantees that the committee will be at odds with itself in most of its deliberations.

To produce a model that will achieve consensus among the faculty is a laudable goal; the core curriculum should have widespread support. Yet in striving to reach this elusive goal, the committee may be forced to sacrifice the more distinctive elements of any signature model in favor of domestic harmony. Accordingly, the most likely outcome is a least-common-denominator model designed to offend no one and to garner the necessary votes from the wider faculty.

Because they are established up front and the model is developed to satisfy them, the criteria for the new curriculum actually are design elements in disguise. As such, these restrictive criteria can undermine the committee's ability to come up with a distinctive signature program. Finally, since the committee's task is to produce a single model, the voting faculty's only comparative frame of reference is the current core curriculum (aka the devil that you know).

A Creative Problem-Solving Model

At Salve Regina University, we were able to avoid many of these problems by adopting a problem-solving model outlined by Vincent Ryan Ruggiero (2003). Ruggiero's

model calls for a progression of four stages: (1) *being aware*, which involves gathering information and defining the problem; (2) *being creative*, which asks the problem-solvers to generate as many creative solutions as possible; (3) *being critical*, which asks participants to set aside the proposed solutions while they develop the criteria by which the solutions will be judged; and (4) *communicating or acting*, which calls for the selection of a solution based on the criteria and implementing that solution.

This model posits a process that is, in a number of ways, counterintuitive but that nonetheless effectively addresses the process problems discussed above. Rather than a representative committee, the process adopted at Salve Regina calls for multiple design teams brought together by common interests and vision. Every faculty member, either individually or in groups, is invited to propose a model curriculum. Rather than developing a compromise model designed to build consensus, the process calls for choosing whichever model receives a majority of the faculty votes; presumably, that model best represents the university's idea of an integrated signature curriculum.

In order to foster creativity, Ruggiero's model reverses the anticipated order of activities by placing the development of criteria after the brainstorming of solutions. Faculty are thus free to focus on developing a distinctive "dream" curriculum without the usual constraints. The development of a variety of models offers the faculty a broader range of choices than the "take it or leave it" approach implied in the single committee, single curriculum process.

At Salve Regina, we considered a common understanding of the process to be so important that we asked the faculty to endorse it in a formal vote, at which point the stages were linked to a strict timetable designed to get to a decision by the time of the faculty's annual post-commencement meeting in May. A steering committee, composed of eight faculty members and the undergraduate dean, was established to oversee the process and to ensure adherence to the schedule. The process itself suggested a variety of questions along the way, questions worth considering in the development of any signature program.

Stage One: What Is the Problem You Want to Solve?

The first task of the steering committee was to define the problem clearly. One aspect of the problem turned on the question of mission. The university community recently had completed a two-year process to develop a new mission statement, and many perceived a cognitive disconnect between the new mission and the set of distribution requirements in place at the time. A second aspect of the problem turned on integrative learning. The distribution requirements had no internal frame of reference or connection; there was no philosophy, no theme, no developmental structure, no interdisciplinary cooperation.

In the end, the steering committee was able to articulate the general dissatisfaction with the current core in a way that gave shape and direction to the problem-solving process. It proposed to the faculty assembly the following clearly defined task: to create a core curriculum of liberal arts and sciences that includes explicit goals and measurable objec-

tives and that is (1) grounded in the university's mission as a Catholic institution founded by the Sisters of Mercy, "to work for a world that is harmonious, just, and merciful," and that is (2) integrated by cooperation.

Stage Two: How Can You Tap into the Creativity of the Faculty?

Ruggiero's model fosters creativity by reversing the anticipated order of events. Instead of specifying criteria first and then tailoring the solution to fit them, the process asks participants to generate solutions before criteria are established. This is particularly challenging for academics who, usually more critical than creative by training, are apt to want to know the criteria first. But it is Ruggiero's particular insight to see that *a priori* criteria can be thought-stoppers. If one begins with a given set of constraints—e.g., the core will have an upper limit of thirty-nine credit hours; the core will be delivered by the current faculty; the core will not touch the current requirements in English, or history, or modern languages; the core must be completed by the end of sophomore year; the core will not cost any more money than the current curriculum—one can with some accuracy predict the outcome, which is likely to bear a striking resemblance to the status quo. Ruggiero avoids this problem by proscribing the creation of criteria until a number of creative solutions have been generated. Liberated from considerations of staffing and cost (which are administrative problems, anyway) and from the need to achieve consensus on credit allocations (which are turf matters rather than curricular principles), faculty are free to focus on their real task: designing a

signature curriculum that reflects the mission and character of the institution.

By the deadline established by Salve Regina's steering committee, five fully developed models and some eighteen focused suggestions had emerged. Two of the models were proposed by individuals, three by teams of two to seven faculty members. The range of approaches and educational philosophies put forth is suggested by the titles of the five models:

- The Seven Frames of Salve Regina University
- The Millennium Core
- Classics Program
- Preparation for Lifelong Learning and World Citizenship
- Searching for a Meaningful Life

The focused suggestions ranged from recommendations about information literacy to competency in the sciences to the inclusion of service learning. The models and the suggestions were collected in a packet and presented, with an opportunity for questions and discussion, at an open session attended by the faculty, the academic administration, and the university's president. The presentation of five fully developed models created a sense of excitement about the process and confidence about the future. The general consensus was that any one of the new models would be much better than the status quo.

Stage Three: How Do You Evaluate the Proposed Models?

At this stage of the process, participants set aside the solutions proposed in Stage Two and develop the criteria by which those solutions will be judged. The challenge is to cre-

ate a set of criteria independent of the existing possible solutions. This is particularly difficult in smaller problem-solving processes where the participants involved in developing Stage Three criteria are the same as those who proposed solutions in Stage Two. At Salve Regina, these difficulties were addressed by a division of labor between the steering committee and the self-generated design teams. Before the solutions were proposed, the steering committee, whose members were not permitted to participate in model design, had set about developing criteria but kept them in strict confidence.

After the five proposed models were presented to the full faculty and academic administration, the steering committee publicly presented its criteria to the faculty assembly. Their original proposal included the following points:

- How is the proposed curriculum based on the concept of the liberal arts and sciences?
 - How will the university be able to measure the extent to which the explicit goals and outcomes of the proposal are being achieved?
 - How does the proposal implement the university's mission to encourage students to seek wisdom and to "work for a world that is harmonious, just, and merciful"?
 - How is the proposed curriculum integrated by cooperation?
- In the discussions on the floor of the assembly, various other criteria were proposed and debated; ultimately, two more were added:
- How does the proposed curriculum present all undergraduates with expectations and standards that promote the development of intellect and character?

- How does the proposed curriculum prepare students for a lifetime of learning, service, and career choices?

The faculty involved in developing the five models were asked to explain in writing how their proposals addressed the criteria, and their answers were collected and published to the faculty at large. These faculty also were free to amend their original proposals to address the criteria; however, it was important for the process that they were under no obligation to do so.

Stage Four: Which Model Do You Want?

The final stage calls for judging the proposed solutions against the established criteria and selecting a model. Rather than merely using the criteria as a checklist, Stage Four involves choosing the model that is deemed the most effective and attractive in terms of the criteria. Rather than compromising the overall integrity of the model to match the list of criteria perfectly, it may be advisable to overlook weaknesses in satisfying one criterion in view of strengths in satisfying others.

At Salve Regina, the final selection of the model took place over two days at a post-commencement faculty meeting conducted by the officers of the faculty assembly. At this stage in the process, all members of the faculty were vitally engaged in the discussions and debates. For example, the faculty in the professional departments, who had not been extensively involved in proposing possible models, now emerged as important decision makers. They critiqued the various models and argued for or against them. In a straw poll taken at the end of the first day, two models clearly were shown to



have widespread support. On the next day, the faculty formally endorsed the model that had garnered the most votes in the straw poll. This model still needed much work; indeed, it required two more years of development before the first courses were offered. Nonetheless, a distinctive, signature curricular model had been selected over the course of a single academic year.

Conclusion

Institutions about to embark on a general education curricular revision should give careful attention to process, and particularly to the kind of outcomes a given process is likely to produce. While consensus is a laudable goal in the selection of a model, it can be an impediment at the design level, especially if the goal is to design a distinctive signature program. The Ruggiero problem-solving model used at Salve Regina University had the effect of tapping into faculty creativity by inviting a variety of groups and individuals to propose curricular models and deferring the definition of selection criteria until after the models were published. Thus, faculty members were free to concentrate on mission, content, skills, and pedagogy without worrying about pleasing all possible constituencies and interest groups. When the time came to select a model, the faculty assembly had five distinctive programs to choose from, and the model selected clearly reflected the university mission statement in a high-profile, signature design. ■

Reference

Ruggiero, Vincent Ryan. 2003. *The art of thinking: A guide to critical and creative thought*. New York: Longman.

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