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Boston College, to Refresh Its Aging Curriculum, Turns to Design Thinkers



M. Scott Brauer for The Chronicle

Mary Crane, Andrew Boynton, and David Quigley are among the academic officials at Boston College who worked with outside consultants in design thinking to revise the longtime core liberal-arts curriculum.

By Dan Berrett | APRIL 06, 2015 ✓ PREMIUM

To break a two-decade deadlock on revising its core curriculum, Boston College sought help from an unlikely source for academic inspiration: the minds that brought the world the Swiffer.

The popular mop/broom was created by a Boston-based company called Continuum, a specialist in design thinking, a method that applies interdisciplinary approaches to solving problems. Design thinking often seeks

not just to devise new gadgets or products but also to reshape the processes that people use in their work.

In recent years, design thinking has become hot in higher education. It is the subject of courses at Stanford and Wake Forest Universities and the University of Kentucky, among other places, and is used to streamline university operations and improve marketing materials and websites.

Harnessing design thinking to change a curriculum, however, is new territory and one fraught with challenges. Founded during the Civil War and carrying on a centuries-old Jesuit tradition, Boston College was not the obvious choice to make such an unconventional move.

"My initial reaction was, 'I need to be convinced here,' " says David Quigley, the provost. But he also had seen how inertia took hold during previous attempts to revise the core, which hadn't changed since 1991. Those conversations played out "according to an almost preordained script," he says, in which fiefdoms were preserved and turf was protected.

By 2012 the college had reached a crossroads. After spending months talking with colleagues across the campus, Mary T. Crane, director of the college's Institute for the Liberal Arts, told a meeting of deans what she had heard: Many professors wanted the core revised; nobody wanted to be the one to do it. After the meeting, she received a note from Andrew C. Boynton, dean of the Carroll School of Management. What did she think of hiring a consultant in design thinking to help?

Like many faculty members, Ms. Crane was skeptical of anything having to do with consultants. She wasn't sure how an outside group could help professors, who are the experts on curriculum.

But she'd heard stories about how difficult curriculum revisions could be, and she knew how colleges had used design-thinking processes in other areas, like facilities and marketing. What's more, at the time, a leadership crisis was roiling the University of Virginia, and Ms. Crane kept hearing how colleges were too hidebound and needed to be more entrepreneurial. The choice was often framed as two extremes: cling to tradition or hurtle toward the unknown.

"Design-thinking consulting," she says, "seemed like a third way."

Empathetic Outsiders

It's a way that has seldom, if ever, led design thinkers to the heart of a university.

"This was probably the closest we'd ever gotten to the crown jewels of any institution," says Anthony T. Pannozzo, Continuum's senior vice president for experience and service design.

Even after Continuum landed the job, its consultants knew they needed to sell the faculty on their role. Some professors objected to what they assumed was a costly and unnecessary expense. (Boston College won't say how much it paid the company, beyond saying it was "a sizable investment"; Continuum says it charged far less than high-end management-consulting firms do.)

Other faculty members saw the consultancy's presence as another example of the corporatization of academe. One professor was blunt, seizing on the Swiffer. "You can design a mop," the professor told the consultants at one meeting, according to several attendees. "You can't design me."

Continuum's staff members struck a deferential tone, casting themselves as interested, empathetic outsiders, says Mr. Pannozzo, who led the project team. Aside from designers, its members included fine artists, M.B.A.'s, engineers, and history graduates. They saw their job as supporting the professors, who would do the actual work of making recommendations. "We made it clear up front that we're not experts in education," he says. "They are."

To get the process moving, Continuum relied on a simple but deceptively effective tool: conversations. The consultants didn't start by asking obvious things, like what the professors wanted to change about the curriculum. Instead, says Mr. Pannozzo, they tried to get to know their subjects as people. Where did they live? What were their families like? What would a perfect Saturday be for them?

Why? "It shifts their mind from thinking about the curriculum to thinking about what they care about," he says. "You have to understand people as people first."

The questions, Mr. Pannozzo says, encourage interviewees to articulate the kinds of experiences they truly value. Design-thinking consultants often explain that people are bound to experience *something* as a result of interactions with the consultants' clients, whether it's because of a product, a call to customer service, or a college class. The key is to identify the experience those clients want people to have, and then figure out how to make it happen.



Thomas Chiles

Design-thinking consultants led town-hall meetings and workshops, like this one, at Boston College.

From there, the consultants got closer to the heart of the matter. They asked students what brought them to Boston College and faculty what courses they were proudest to teach.

Along the way, the consultants gave updates at town-hall meetings, where a member of Continuum's staff took notes on the feedback the company was receiving, posting it online for all to see in real time. The process enabled the professors to watch the process unfold, articulate what they wanted students to get from their experience, and start building a curriculum to achieve those ends.

Continuum helped break the logjam, even if the result is not a radical departure. The faculty chose to retain the framework of Boston College's 42-credit core; courses that already fulfill requirements will continue to be offered.

Faculty members devised two new sets of courses for the core that will begin in September. The subjects and syllabi are being developed by professors working together, not with Continuum.

Some will be team-taught, six-credit courses with labs for about 80 students, examining topics like the global implications of climate change, the social context of violence, and genocide. Others will be paired interdisciplinary seminars on a common topic, seen from different points of view: engagement, empathy, and ethics, studied from theological and musical perspectives; the natural and human-made worlds, seen from philosophical and literary viewpoints; the body and illness, taught by a nursing professor and an English professor.

Kathy Dunn, an associate professor of biology, and Scott T. Cummings, an associate professor of theater, will teach a pair of connected seminars on infectious diseases. The biology course will cover epidemics. The theater seminar will explore illness as metaphor.

Ms. Dunn had taught science courses for nonmajors and felt that they didn't quite hit the right level of rigor or impart enough content. For her, the new course is an opportunity to do it better, while also pushing her out of her comfort zone. She and Mr. Cummings are still working through the details of their courses, but they say the effort to refresh the core brought them together to try something different.

Sparking Conversations

In all, faculty members acknowledge that team-taught, thematic, and interdisciplinary courses aren't a new innovation. The important thing for many professors, though, was not the final product. It was the process that arose. Professors from different departments were able to talk about the curriculum, exchange ideas about teaching, and come up with new courses.

"It is an experiment and it might fail, but it's worth trying because the very process of trying is putting people into conversation," says Julian E. Bourg, an associate professor of history, who was initially skeptical. "That's very, very healthy."

How sustained those conversations will be is another matter. Boston College has no faculty senate or regular mechanism for shared governance. Mr. Bourg wonders how the faculty will be able to evaluate the new courses, see how well they work, and revise them. For now, a core-renewal committee will manage that job.

Outside of Boston College, it's unclear whether design thinking will influence curriculum changes elsewhere. IDEO, an international design-thinking firm, has worked with colleges to revamp career-services centers and offer internships, but the prospect of becoming entangled with a process that is as slow-moving, decentralized, and bound by precedent as curricular revision gives reason for pause, says Sandy Speicher, managing director of the firm's education studio.

Other design-thinking consultants, however, are bullish on the opportunities, especially as colleges seek to differentiate themselves in a competitive market.

For now, companies and universities are likely to be watching whether the design-thinking process at Boston College will lead to long-term change after so many years.

Mr. Boynton, the business-school dean who suggested using a design-thinking company, is aware of all the challenges to sustaining change.

As a scholar of innovation, he knows that an organization's ability to innovate ultimately doesn't depend on brain power.

"It's not the stock of knowledge," he says. "It's the flow of ideas."

Correction (4/8/2015, 4:29 p.m.): This article originally said the company IDEO was in San Francisco. While it has an office there, it also has offices around the world. The article has been updated to reflect that.

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