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Want to Revamp Your Curriculum? Here's How to Avoid a Quagmire.

By Vimal Patel | March 4, 2018

Plymouth State University needed to change.

A 16-percent drop in undergraduate enrollment over three years spooked administrators at the tuition-dependent regional public university. They also wanted to better prepare students for an increasingly interdisciplinary world, whether they went on to industry or to graduate school, says Donald L. Birx, who became president in 2015.

So when Birx was still new to his role, he set his sights on overhauling the general-education curriculum, which was a distribution model in which students picked courses from a menu of options. In the years that followed, the New Hampshire college, surrounded by mountains and lakes, settled on a vision: Undergraduates would move purposefully from one of a revamped set of first-year seminars to interdisciplinary general-education courses, and would connect their experiences with a senior capstone project.

While not everyone is on board with all of the changes, Plymouth State has started to unveil parts of its new curriculum. The college's experience, like that of other institutions, illustrates how fraught big general-education changes can be.

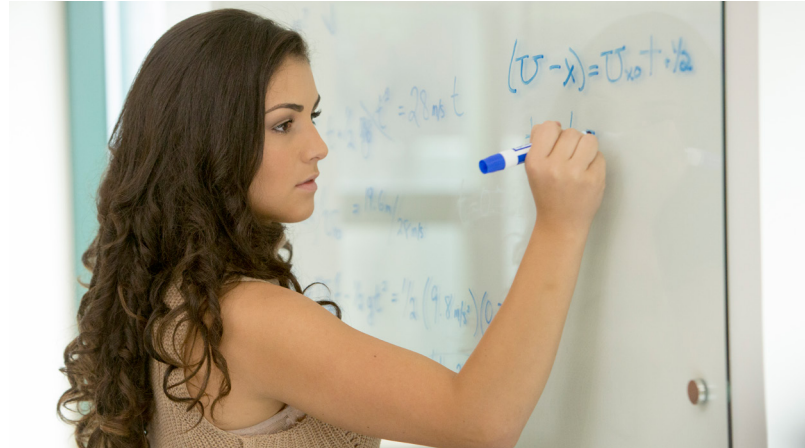
"You have to work with faculty and convince them about the need for major change," Birx says. "At the same time, we also are overhauling the administrative side. It's got to be done together synchronously, because it's a system change."

Universities change their core curricula for many reasons. At Plymouth State, the new president wanted to increase retention and enrollment by creating excitement around a new model. At the University of Colorado at Boulder, leaders wanted to revamp an inflexible core in place since the Reagan administration. At Duke University, administrators sought a core that was simpler but would encourage students to push their intellectual boundaries.

At each institution, leaders cited lofty ideals. But in the gulf between vision and reality rests the Waterloo of many would-be reformers: winning the support of a professoriate passionate to preserve its authority over academic matters. Professors also worry about university governance, how their departments will fare in a resource shake-up, and market pressures driving course offerings. But what professors often see as principled stands can look to administrators a lot like unreasonable, stubborn resistance to change.

"There's often a high priority to maintain the status quo," says Alexander Rosenberg, a philosophy professor at Duke, where a years-long curricular overhaul was tabled last year amid faculty resistance. "Curricular reform always has implications for resources, always threatens to gore some people's oxes, always requires you to take sides on substantive matters about the weight of various disciplines."

So how can administrative and academic leaders navigate a potential curricular quagmire? Communication.



Curricular overhauls never unfold in a vacuum. Plymouth State is an extreme example of this. The course changes are entwined in a radical restructuring. Birx wants to eliminate departments and colleges. In their place will be seven “clusters,” like exploration and discovery; arts and technologies; and innovation and entrepreneurship.

The clusters underpin the curriculum changes. In the next couple of years, the university plans to transition to cluster-themed general education. The shift is already starting. One class combines existing courses in entrepreneurial marketing, graphic design, and business innovation, putting students together in interdisciplinary teams to work on challenges facing a nearby town. The university is moving from three-credit to four-credit courses and adding lab sessions so students can interact with peers in their clusters and have more hands-on experiences. First-year seminars connect students from different majors to work on a big, interdisciplinary challenge, like how to increase civic engagement or what to do about fake news.



Photo credit: Kaleb Hart '11

In designing and winning support for a basic remaking of the curriculum at Plymouth State, says the president, Donald Birx, “the challenge was to give faculty a composite picture of something that doesn’t exist anywhere.”

The reform has an air of urgency. In addition to the financial problems of small institutions like Plymouth State, which has about 4,200 undergraduates, the university has deeper challenges. New Hampshire is expected to see a drop in the number of high-school graduates over the coming decades, forcing the university to become more creative in luring undergraduates from the state and beyond.

Birx began meeting with faculty members to explain his idea even before he officially became president. Last year the university began its transition to four-credit courses. This fall some incoming freshmen began their first-year seminars. Starting next fall, all first-time students will take these courses, Birx says.

Faculty members wanted data and evidence that the changes would help the university. That proved challenging, says Birx, since a precise example of what Plymouth State was attempting didn’t exist.

But he could call upon his past. Since 2015, in town-hall sessions and individual meetings with faculty members, Birx explained his experience with clusters as a senior administrator at other universities. The use of clusters at the University of Houston, where he served as vice president for research, helped earn it a “highest research activity” designation from the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, he said. “Clusters allowed a once regional comprehensive university to be first class nationally in education and research in the interdisciplinary areas in which the university and community have unique strengths,” Birx wrote in an email.

The efforts at Houston were focused mostly on the sciences and were not on the scale of the academic overhaul he proposed at Plymouth State. But his descriptions gave faculty members a sense of where Birx wanted to take the university. [He also blogged about his goals.](#)

It’s a long process, and there is no shortcut, Birx says. “You have to get to know each other. You have to trust each other. The challenge was to give faculty a composite picture of something that doesn’t exist anywhere.”

Faculty members still have concerns about whether Plymouth State's new structure furthers administrators' goals of increased retention and recruitment, says Ann McClellan, the chair — until chairs are eliminated — of the English department. However, although English faculty members, along with those in other humanities departments, tend to be skeptical of market-oriented educational approaches, McClellan says she and her colleagues are mostly supportive.

The president had some advantages in winning faculty support. Plymouth State is an unusually collegial place, averse to acrimonious clashes, many faculty members say. Crucially, even professors who remain skeptical of the restructuring, agree that the campus needed to change somehow to remain financially viable.

But part of why Birx has avoided generating faculty resistance, says Christopher C. Chabot, a biology professor who helped organize a faculty union in 2016, is because the president constantly communicated about the changes, laying out a vision while also allowing faculty members to work through the details with no predetermined outcome. "To the president's credit, he let us take some of this and run with it," Chabot says. "It's not fully fleshed out yet."

The devil of curricular reform, of course, is in the details. Chabot says one of the drivers of the faculty-union campaign was worries about faculty workload. That remains a concern as new general-education classes are added and professors are charged with developing more hands-on experiences for undergraduates. "This," Chabot says, "is where the hard work begins, really."

While communication and time may be necessary to success, they don't ensure it. At Duke University, a curriculum overhaul that was discussed during hundreds of meetings over three years fell apart last April.

Duke administrators wanted to simplify their core and encourage more risk-taking by students — "a little adventure," as one professor put it — by allowing them to retroactively convert some letter-graded courses to pass/fail. The proposed curriculum would also have required a multidisciplinary team-taught seminar for all first-year students; a mentored scholarly experience; and, beyond a major, an area of depth, like a minor, certificate, or second major.

Faculty members raised a wide-ranging set of concerns. The proposal was big on vision, light on strategy, many professors said. It didn't sufficiently answer how its ambitious goals would interact with other parts of the university, like admissions and recruitment. Many worried about how the increased advising burden required by the new curriculum would be met. Languages faculty members — and professors concerned about America's retrenchment from the world — lamented the reduction of language-course requirements. Others balked at what they saw as succumbing to market pressures and helicopter parents. On and on.

An up-or-down vote was scheduled, but administrators tabled it, recognizing the breadth of faculty concerns. It was death by a thousand cuts. But one theme expressed by faculty members across the university was anxiety and uncertainty about how a curricular change would reshape resources.

The chair of the overhaul committee and the college's dean did not respond to messages seeking comment.

Rosenberg, who supported the proposed curriculum, says he's not sure what changes could have been made to win faculty approval.

"I suppose if they had designed a process that insulated the debate and the outcome from any kind of implication for resource allocation, they might have succeeded," he says. "That's always the problem in curricular debate. People look at curriculum with an eye toward 'What does this mean for me as a faculty member?' instead of 'What does it mean for the students as a whole?' That's unavoidable."

The president constantly communicates about the changes, laying out a vision.



Things went better at the University of Colorado at Boulder's College of Arts and Sciences. As at Plymouth State, the principal players emphasized communication, and there was already a general sense that change was needed. The old curriculum, conceived in 1987, was too rigid, says Cora Randall, one of the professors leading the overhaul committee. For example, it required picking courses from each of seven categories, leading students to check boxes rather than pursue their passions, Randall says.

Administrators wanted to simplify their core, with the hope of improving retention and making it easier for students to add a minor or second major. The overhaul also included a contentious six-credit diversity requirement, with three credits each of U.S. and global perspectives.

Randall and her co-chair held more than a dozen town halls and, in one semester, had more than 90 meetings with faculty members. They surveyed colleagues in real time using clickers to see which parts of the proposed changes they supported and which ones they didn't.

To keep faculty support, they compromised when necessary. For example, requiring digital-literacy courses was part of the early discussions. But professors couldn't agree on what digital literacy meant, and because many students would acquire digital skills in their majors, the effort was abandoned.

In 2016, after years of discussion, faculty approved the new curriculum by a 458-73 vote. Starting in August, all incoming students will use it.

"Everybody says 'communication,' but I can't emphasize how much that helped," Randall says. "By communication I really mean going out there and talking to people, not sending emails. You really need to talk to them and listen to what they have to say and report back to them."

It was also helpful that the college's dean guaranteed departments that there would be a grace period of several years before adjustments would be made in resources. That alleviated professors' immediate worries about how their departments — in which financial support can hinge on students' credit hours — would fare in a shake-up.

"The idea was to give departments time to adjust their curriculum if they found that they were losing too much enrollment," Randall says. "I don't know how much of a difference this made in the vote, but I'm sure that it helped."



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