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

By DAN BERRETT

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

CURRICULUM

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?



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.

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 inter-

ested, empathetic outsiders, says Mr. Panno-
zozzo, 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 profes-
sors, who would do the actual work of mak-
ing 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 cur-
riculum. Instead, says Mr. Panno-
zozzo, they tried to get to know their subjects as people.
Where did they live? What were their fami-
lies like? What would a perfect Saturday be
for them?

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

The questions, Mr. Panno-
zozzo says, en-
courage interviewees to articulate the
kinds of experiences they truly value. De-
sign-thinking consultants often explain that
people are bound to experience *something*
as a result of interactions with the consul-
tants' clients, whether it's because of a prod-
uct, 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.

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 up-
dates at town-hall meetings, where a mem-
ber of Continuum's staff took notes on the
feedback the company was receiving, posting
it online for all to see in real time. The pro-
cess enabled the professors to watch the pro-
cess unfold, articulate what they wanted stu-
dents 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 Sep-
tember. The subjects and syllabi are being
developed by professors working together,
not with Continuum.

Some will be team-
taught, six-credit cours-
es with labs for about 80
students, examining top-
ics like the global implica-
tions of climate change, the
social context of violence,
and genocide. Others will
be paired interdisziplin-
ary seminars on a com-
mon topic, seen from dif-
ferent points of view: en-
gagement, empathy, and
ethics, studied from theo-
logical and musical per-
spectives; the natural and
human-made worlds, seen
from philosophical and lit-
erary 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 asso-
ciate professor of theater, will teach a pair
of connected seminars on infectious diseas-
es. 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 op-
portunity to do it better, while also push-
ing her out of her comfort zone. She and Mr.
Cummings are still working through the de-
tails 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 interdisziplin-
ary courses aren't a new innovation. The im-
portant thing for many professors, though,
was not the final product. It was the process
that arose. Professors from different depart-
ments were able to talk about the curricu-
lum, 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 profes-
sor of history, who was initially skeptical.
"That's very, very healthy."

How sustained those conversations will
be is another matter. Boston College has



THOMAS CHILES

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

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 cur-
riculum changes elsewhere. IDEO, a de-
sign-thinking firm in San Francisco, has
worked with colleges to revamp career-ser-
vices centers and offer internships, but the
prospect of becoming entangled with a pro-
cess that is as slow-moving, decentralized,
and bound by precedent as curricular re-
vision gives reason for pause, says Sandy
Speicher, managing director of the firm's
education studio.

Other design-thinking consultants, how-
ever, are bullish on the opportunities, espe-
cially as colleges seek to differentiate them-
selves in a competitive market.

For now, companies and universities
are likely to be watching whether the de-
sign-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 ulti-
mately doesn't depend on brain power.

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

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