

Academic Innovation: Out from the Noise

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BACKGROUND

When I was assigned to lead a faculty innovation center at a public university in 2012, higher education was abuzz with exploring innovations such as course redesign, flexible learning spaces, and MOOCs. These learning innovation initiatives rest on a foundation of new technologies or new technology-enabled programs and are excellent at generating noise. What technology-based campus initiatives are less good at is enabling sustainable and resilient campus change.¹ This is especially true in the domain of teaching and learning, an area where institutional structures and norms are deeply entrenched. It was assumed faculty would not only embrace using basic technologies for learning, but they would also enthusiastically volunteer to take chances with their teaching practices in the service of student success. Like so many universities, we supported early adopters by providing opportunities to learn new methodologies either as individuals or as part of learning communities. It soon became apparent, however, that these innovations—which focused on the core business of the university, i.e., delivering high quality and effective courses—were an expensive proposition. The available resources of time, space, people, and money rapidly became taxed. The need for instructional designers, in particular, became critical for scaling online programs (in 2019, the university had 1.5 designers for 1,200+ faculty; a familiar situation for many institutions).

Initiatives such as the redesign of low level, large enrollment courses; universal design for learning (UDL) faculty networks²; and a modified course review process based on Quality Matters standards³, yielded benefits for students whose professors voluntarily sought to avail themselves of the new experiences. Campus-based professional development programs highlighted the wins and generated requests for expansion and other resources for developing world-class teaching. In sum, these programs showcased the good work faculty were doing to innovate their teaching approaches. They also highlighted the professional collaborations between faculty and instructional designers needed to create both efficiency and effectiveness for teaching. This was especially true for blended and online courses where it was critical to provide transparency about course objectives and how they would be assessed.

PROBLEM

Within a span of five years, larger challenges began to supersede these “boutique” efforts for effecting change in the classroom. A wider and deeper approach was needed to transform the core business of student success. The press to increase student enrollment, particularly graduate enrollment, and develop pathways to graduation for transfer and first-generation students posed an institutional shift that required different resources for attaining new institutional goals. One issue, however, remained the same: how to deliver high quality and effective courses DESPITE the reprioritization of resources? Furthermore, how could we put

trust for developing high quality courses back into the hands of faculty while at the same time provide them with high quality instructional design support?

With the goal of increasing graduate enrollments, we collaborated with academic departments to ramp up the transition of face-to-face programs to online delivery and to support the creation of newly approved online graduate programs. We called upon many of the faculty early adopters to help us with the quality review process, which had been a successful solution at first but not sustainable at scale. A major sticking point was the time and effort needed to align curricular goals and outcomes with appropriate assessments. Because course syllabi (outlines) are often handed down from one instructor to another, courses can morph from their originally approved versions. Syllabi originally intended to meet internal and external standards may no longer live up to their promise. Finally, faculty who had been reluctant to teach online found themselves being assigned to do so as part of their teaching loads. Many became uneasy about consulting with instructional designers without prior experience for this sort of collaboration. As such, we were entering a new era of academic innovation.

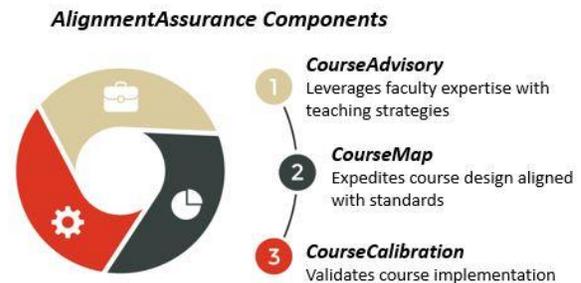
Also, we began hearing from instructional designers, faculty partners, and even some librarians that the concept of alignment was a challenge for many faculty as they went through the course design process. Many consultation hours were spent on this first essential step towards high quality course development, and completion could take anywhere from three weeks to three months. We know higher education faculty are content experts, and that is why they are hired to teach. However, having to prepare a course for blended or online delivery may be the first time that faculty are confronted with curricular design elements in an intentional way.

SOLUTION

Many faculty have a personal relationship with what and how they teach, but the learning curve for designing a high-quality online course can take a lot of time. This poses a problem for getting new online programs ready for student enrollments in a timely way. For many institutions, purchasing ready-made online courses is not an option, either financially or philosophically. In our case, we wanted a solution that would rapidly transition not only courses but also faculty expertise into the world of digital learning. But we could not do it alone. That's why we chose ClearAlignment as a partner for accelerating the online course design process. They have a three-pronged approach called AlignmentAssurance that solves this problem by providing a well-defined process of what constitutes stellar design and implementation of an online program. The AlignmentAssurance process does not solely benefit faculty--it also supports student persistence through the rapidly changing online education delivery system. For us, ClearAlignment is the simple solution to a complex but critical piece in the academic transformation process.

CONCLUSION

ClearAlignment's AlignmentAssurance and integrated platform works with our people and systems while crating distinctive elearning experiences centered on student and instructor outcome goals. Our faculty trusted the ClearAlignment team during a potentially frustrating process. They reported that their coaches genuinely understood the professors' unique needs and their students' goals. We also realized how easy it is now to maintain quality education at scale. The design documents called CourseMaps are excellent tools when conducting annual curriculum reviews and re-accreditation. This is possible because each course has learning objectives that are aligned with program goals and with the regional and specialized standards. We benefited from each component of AlignmentAssurance.



1 **CourseAdvisory** are coaching sessions for faculty that promote student-centric activities and online course management strategies. We use proven, powerful elearning methodologies to leverage faculty expertise and teaching approaches.

2 **CourseMap** is a course design document that represents the activities and assessments that support each of the learning outcomes identified for the course. It is created by the ClearAlignment platform and is the roadmap professors use when organizing their courses in the Learning Management System (LMS). A CourseMap expedites the online course design process and ensures alignment with academic and specialized standards for learning, whether face-to-face, blended, or fully online.

3 **CourseCalibration** is a report providing course implementation evidence of what was or wasn't done that impacts student learning outcomes. These audits compare the CourseMap with what students see in the LMS. We traditionally provide CourseCalibration reports at the end of each academic term that the courses are offered, however we can also generate a CourseCalibration for an existing course at the beginning of our engagement.

WORKS CITED

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