

♪ (Music) ♪

Today's American universities and colleges face a challenge: how to prepare students for a changing world and how to do that in a way that is financially responsible for students and financially viable for those institutions. In response to these challenges, institutions across the country are working to rethink and redesign their curricula, and departments are at the center of this work.

The University of Texas at Austin is one such institution and one department grappling with this challenge is the Department of Journalism. In today's podcast, I'll be talking with Kathleen McElroy, Associate Director and Senior Lecturer at the School of Journalism in the Moody School of Communication here at UT, and I'm Julie Stewart with the Faculty Innovations Center, and you're listening to a podcast entry on the FIC's blog, "Spark."

♪ (Music) ♪

You've been involved in curriculum redesign, you're still involved in curriculum redesign. What brought you into working with curriculum redesign?

>> Well I feel as if we were sort of brought into it. We were told about 2021 and we were asked "Is there anything about the curriculum that you would like to change?" And, you know, every school probably has something that it wants a little different in its curriculum, but usually you're not giving the sort of time or even have time to ask that question or to answer it.

And we thought about it, and yeah, there are a couple of things. Our students really like what we have, but there's always an opportunity to make things better. And we're also an industry that changes dramatically with every new technology, maybe every new political change of when. So the idea of curriculum redesign was very appealing. That was a passive voice which, students, don't do at home. (Laughs)

>> Once you got involved in it, where did that kind of launching, that stepping off, where did that take you?

>> Well, I would say what's interesting about curriculum redesign is you don't start with the individual classes ...

♪ (Pomp and Circumstance) ♪

You have to start with the student marching across the stage. So I think one of the things that your office does very well is make us think about not "What does this class do or that class do?" but "What's the outcome?"

(Music slows down)

That really has to be the beginning point, and if there'd been past curriculum failures or things not quite right, maybe it's because we don't think enough about "Oh, we weren't taught to think about what's the student marching across the stage with?"

(Music speeds up)

I actually came up with a term for it today, I called it "What do we want in that student's technological and intellectual backpack?"

>> That's good.

>> We started off that way, and it's a very painful and long discussion. And then you work your way into "Well, what courses get you there?"

>> I know what you were describing is the work that you did with your colleague, and not just in the curriculum camp, but I'm sure multiple discussions and conversations with them.

Now that you've got it moving, where do you want it to go?

>> First of all, this can't be done without faculty input and student input. So where we want it to go now is taking our ideas and seeing how we can improve upon what we have with faculty and student input. I think, maybe -- and I'm very new to academia in that I'm redesigning curriculum is a little funny, maybe, because it's not my background, but someone has to start somewhere. I don't think you can redo a curriculum ... I hate to say this, I don't think you can take a hundred people, put them in a room and say, "Let's redesign the curriculum," and it happens easily. I think what my colleague, Chris Wilson, and I have been charged with is getting feedback from faculty and students, shaping something, but it's not the final statue.

So it's not just our ideas, but it's ideas that I think we all agree that this works. And you can't build a curriculum for all 55,000 special snowflakes. Students may change majors, they may change their minds within a major. So you want flexibility, but there needs to be clear paths. Maybe I'm changing my thought process just as we talk, as a matter of fact, you know? So, you know, we need to make sure that that path is clear for the student.

>> Okay. And that's what you see this curriculum redesign doing?

>> Curriculum redesign is making us more nimble.

>> I love that word. I've heard you use it, and in fact, I appropriated it from you, so thank you for the word. But I see what you're getting at. There's ... You know where you're going, but there are multiple ways to get there.

>> And we need to make sure our students understand that there are multiple ways to get there. But, at the same time, there is a path, and we want you on that path. We are not going

to design a personal curriculum for you, only because we don't really know what you want, and you don't really know what you want. But based on successes and failures -- this is where failure does come in handy. Based on the things we know that work and don't work, these are the paths that we've decided you should go down, or you should at least attempt.

>> You said something a minute ago that it's rolling around in the back of my brain, and you said that you're very new to academia, and that it's kind of ironic that you're working on the curriculum. But what do you think your experiences in the field let you bring in to this process. Being new to academia's not necessarily a bad thing.

>> You always think your ideas are new, and you always think that maybe they're better, but they're not. If people are doing things that maybe don't seem practical or whatever, there may be a reason for it, and that's one of the things I've learned; is that people make situations work for them, and I think a lot of curricula are like that. People are making it work the best they can, given that moment in time. So if I'm changing the curriculum, what are the negatives? Who and what might get lost by making these changes? Especially at a university like Texas. If I do this change, what about all of the students who are transferring in? Does this change work for them? You know?

>> Yes.

>> And I think that's something that we at the University need to do a better job of is understanding that many students don't come here for four years. And because of economic reasons, grade, being closer to home, it's cheaper not to come here for all four years, that we shouldn't create policies based on the student coming right out of the Houston area or Dallas area into UT for four years.

>> Only four years.

>> Only four years. So, again, I've gone off on a different path, but ...

>> No, no, no.

>> ... I do, you know ... We can't create this perfect freshman experience when maybe up to 30% of our freshmen at one point, wouldn't have gotten that first year here.

>> So, what you brought up was that idea of "Here's the curriculum. Yes, there are beautiful and positive things in it, but one of the things we need to consider is who or what gets lost in that process of the curriculum."

♪ (Music) ♪

>> A third of our students are going into traditional journalism jobs, right? But our students who aren't going into journalism jobs love our curriculum as it is. I've sat and spoken to them

and said "No, tell me," and they go "No, I love taking the journalism courses, and I love being forced to learn video and audio and how to edit and social media," and then they take those skills and they put them on a website or they're social media editors or they're becoming lawyers, so we have to be aware that some of the things that we're doing are working, and so don't change that. But at the same time, be aware that maybe there are students who shouldn't be forced to take certain writing courses.

♪ (Music) ♪

So you know my background. I was an editor in New York, working with foreign correspondents and political correspondents and things like that, so the fact that I now have 19 year olds stare at me is (laughs) kind of different, but I worried that yes, I know good journalism is. I can even ... I can recognize it, but how do I get into a 19 year old's head about producing it?

I'm in a field in which my experience is valued, but it doesn't necessarily mean I'm a good teacher. And I think that's something that if you are a professional, you should have that fear. You shouldn't assume that you know how to connect to 19 and 20 year olds.

>> Thank you for listening to my conversation with Kathleen McElroy. Please check out the "Spark" blog at spark.facultyinnovate.utexas.edu. You can also find our website at facultyinnovate.utexas.edu.