Chapter 6
The Curricular Approach:
How Design Thinking Can Identify and Center Ubiquitous Institutional Learning Goals

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, the authors explore the unintentional but striking synergies that exist between design thinking and the curricular approach to learning. Specifically, the authors explore how the define step of design thinking can be applied to the crucial step of defining ubiquitous institutional learning aims to guide the work of educators who work outside the classroom. By applying concepts of design thinking to the curricular approach, the authors reinforce the importance of collaborations and innovation as key aspects when defining both the desired learning outcomes and the environments within which this learning will occur. The chapter concludes with an acknowledgement of the challenges faced by educators applying concepts of both the curricular approach and design thinking.

INTRODUCTION

The Curricular Approach (CA) to learning beyond the classroom was initially developed in the early 2000s, (Kerr & Tweedy, 2006), without any awareness of design thinking (DT). But, after twenty years of implementation at hundreds of schools in the USA and internationally, (Kerr, Edwards, Tweedy, Lichterman, & Knerr, 2020), it is evident that important synergies exist between the key concepts of design thinking and the essential elements of the Curricular Approach. In this chapter, the authors will discuss these synergies and how design thinking can inform and advance the implementation of a Cur-

ricular Approach. Specifically, we will explore how DT can inform the crucial step in a CA of defining learning aims.

This chapter will explore how the CA is an example of utilizing design thinking to identify educational aims that are college or university specific, based on the unique culture, mission, and students found at each institution of higher education. It will also explore the role that the non-instructional units of a college campus can play in actualizing the potential for student learning and success. Transformational change becomes possible when the majority of the campus community can identify their role and obligation to help students achieve institutionally defined and recognized student learning aims.

Specifically, authors will explore the critical need for student affairs educators, and others who work with students outside of the classroom, to take student learning seriously and apply design thinking to education beyond the classroom. Readers will be given a call to action to view their success in terms of student learning gains that result from inputs into the learning process and environment made by all campus educators beyond the classroom. Educators will be challenged to move toward deliberative frameworks about what students should learn and how students can best learn in a unique college environment.

The curricular approach (CA) to student learning beyond the classroom will be briefly summarized including the ten essential elements with an emphasis on the process of achieving defined goals for student learning.

BACKGROUND

What should a college student learn? This is a core question of the Curricular Approach (CA) to learning beyond the classroom, that is utilized by student affairs divisions and other departments across the country and internationally. If an institution wants to offer a holistic, cohesive, and purposeful educational experience for all students; one that recognizes the needs of individual learners and how they best learn; its leadership, faculty, and staff should acknowledge and harness the learning opportunities that exist in what has traditionally been referred to as co-curricular spaces. Design thinking applications within the CA call for a stronger definition of holistic student learning. Well intentioned co-curricular educators working with a lack of defined learning outcomes can at times lead to a scattershot approach and add chaos to the world of college student learning. Clear paths to learning attainment may be elusive to the student as dozens of campus sectors compete for student time and energy.

Consider what could be achieved if all the college entities involved in co-curricular education shared common outcomes for student learning: A concise statement of co-curricular educational priority is developed for all sectors to use as a guidepost. Learning goals further define and narrow the educational priority, each with specific learning outcomes for clarity, action, and measurement. Under such a framework, orientation programs assume responsibility for introducing learning goals and pathways, sectors such as housing, career development, student unions, wellness programs, and diversity centers specialize in key goal and learning outcome areas to further student learning toward a commonly shared educational priority. Each sector can focus their energies on specific learning aims while working toward a more commonly shared priority.

Implementation of the Curricular Approach requires a mindset shift that situates those of us who work with students outside of the classroom as learners and as educators; defines the learning that should occur beyond the classroom based on specific institutional characteristics; and guides staff to develop opportunities or strategies that will allow students to achieve those pre-defined learning aims.

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