

THE NISOD PAPERS



An occasional publication dedicated to topics of interest to community and technical college educators.

Questioning Curriculum Purpose and Process: Reflecting on a Major Curriculum Overhaul

Texas State Technical College (TSTC) recently completed a merger that combined its four colleges, formerly independently accredited by Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges, into a single accredited institution. Merging four colleges into one was a large task. The various departments and processes of the four individual colleges had to be merged into a new single institution in a manner that best served our students. One of the more difficult aspects of combining the colleges into a single system was blending four institutions' curricula. This essay presents questions about the curriculum we were forced to reconsider during this work and have subsequently reflected upon after completing this major overhaul of many of our instructional programs.

Before the merger, each of the four TSTC colleges was responsible for their own instructional program inventory with their own unique curriculum. It was commonplace for there to be two, three, or even four versions of associate degrees and certificates in the same occupational area among the institutions. For example, an associate of applied science degree in automotive technology was offered at TSTC Waco, TSTC Harlingen, and TSTC Marshall, and while the name of this degree was the same at each campus, the curriculum varied greatly from one campus to the next. As independent colleges, these differences in curriculum were acceptable, and indeed expected since they were designed and developed in independent processes. Moving forward, however, the task at hand was to unify the instructional programs so that the same curriculum would be in place at each campus. The course requirements for the associate of applied science degree in automotive technology, for example, would be identical for students completing the degree in Waco, Harlingen, Marshall, or anywhere else in the TSTC system.

To accomplish this curriculum merger, numerous strategies and activities were employed, including a variety of curriculum mapping and comparison exercises, faculty meetings, conference calls with administrators and faculty, and soliciting feedback from industry advisory committees. Some instructional programs were able to unify their curricula with little trouble, while friction among other departments prevented a smooth consolidation. Throughout the process we found ourselves asking some basic, yet very important questions:

- What is the purpose of a curriculum?
- Who designs the curriculum?
- How is a curriculum designed?

While we considered these questions to some degree, our top priorities were the task at hand and institutional and accreditation deadlines. With more time now to consider what was accomplished and how, we can thoroughly reflect on the curriculum unification process and ask ourselves these questions again through the lens of the curriculum-merger project.

What Is the Purpose of Curriculum?

To address this question, we first had to determine what exactly was meant by the term "curriculum." Although it may seem like a basic question, it takes only a glance at education literature on the topic to realize that the answer is far from simple.

The term "curriculum" carries multiple meanings. To some educators, the curriculum consists of conscious intentions commonly described in plans of study and other formal documents—a blueprint, if you will, of what is expected or intended to take place. Even within this definition, often called the formal curriculum, there is much to delineate. For example, does the curriculum include only the planned content, or does it also consist of the teaching, evaluation methods, syllabi, textbooks, and other materials used? Some educators and scholars define

curriculum at the classroom level, by the intentions and actions of individual teachers with specific students. Other educators contend that the curriculum is best described by what students actually learn in schools, whether as a part of an intentional plan or not. This view of curriculum includes aspects of what Jackson (1968) called the “hidden curriculum” and what other scholars have termed the “informal curriculum”—unwritten, unrecognized, and sometimes unintended knowledge, values, and beliefs that are part of the learning process in schools and classrooms.

With a myriad of definitions to consider, a single, universal definition of curriculum is difficult to establish. Even though an absolute definition was not our goal, we were at least able to agree on a general description of curriculum as applicable to our work at TSTC. When we speak of curriculum as administrators at TSTC, we are almost always referring to the blueprint analogy mentioned earlier; that is, a plan of what is expected or intended to take place—the formal curriculum. Following this understanding, a curriculum for a particular degree or certificate program is a prescribed sequence of courses, and a curriculum for a particular course consists of the planned learning activities in which the students will participate in order to meet the course outcomes.

It is worth remembering that the word curriculum comes from the Latin for “course,” describing the path or the course of a journey. The term denotes a means rather than an end. It conveys moving from a starting point to a destination, a movement that proceeds along some path. Students are not left to their own devices to determine the route from start to finish. Rather, their passage is informed by the experience of the faculty who offer their well-thought-out advice for advancing students’ educational journeys.

In our understanding as college administrators and educators, the purpose of curriculum is to determine the right ideas, decide the order in which they could or should be learned by students as they develop, and thereafter present these ideas at the right times with clarity, associations, organization, and application.

Who Designs the Curriculum?

As administrators working with a deadline to consolidate four colleges’ curricula, it was tempting at times to simply make curriculum decisions independently and bypass the spirited and sometimes contentious discussions between

groups of faculty. Certainly this would have been the easiest route to a single curriculum for some programs. However, we often reminded ourselves that it is the faculty who should and must design the curriculum, for they are the content experts and educators. As administrators, our role in this process was to support the faculty and facilitate their work. We did this by providing tools and resources, such as industry data, state guidelines and accreditation rules, student success data, curriculum maps, and various templates. While we were active participants in the process, by helping faculty see relationships between courses and overall program goals, for example, it was the faculty who made the actual curricular decisions.

How Is the Curriculum Designed?

There are many factors to consider when designing a curriculum for a program of study. When initially determining the process for our curriculum consolidation task, the number of questions that arose and the volume of data we gathered quickly became unwieldy. We realized that we needed to regroup and prioritize our questions and, if possible, simplify our tasks. We were reminded of the four fundamental questions that Tyler (1949) posed in his seminal book, *Basic Principles of Curriculum and Instruction*. The four questions identified by Tyler that must be answered in developing any curriculum are the following:

1. What educational purposes should the school seek to attain?
2. What educational experiences can be provided that are likely to attain these purposes?
3. How can these educational experiences be effectively organized?
4. How can we determine whether these purposes are being attained?

Reducing the work ahead of us to these four fundamental questions certainly helped clarify the task at hand and served to guide our consideration of the vast amount of internal and external data and factors that were at play.

Of course there are many valid ways to select courses and develop course sequences from the mass of data that curriculum planning committees have at their disposal. Some of the steps we took to arrive at a final single curriculum for each program are listed here:

- Ask all faculty, or each group of faculty, to build the curriculum of their dreams, which may or may not be their program’s current

curriculum. Have each group submit their dream curriculum to the facilitators.

- Identify the commonalities and differences among the dream curricula and provide written feedback to the faculty about the commonalities and differences.
- Create, for further consideration, two or three curriculum models that are reflective of many of the commonalities in the dream curricula. Provide these to the faculty for their review and discussion.
- As a group, brainstorm ways to pull the best components from all plans to create a single curriculum plan. Allow sufficient time to discuss each iteration.
- Obtain consensus from the faculty to “try” one plan.

The word “try” in step five is used intentionally to draw attention to the fact that curricula are rarely, if ever, static plans. In fact, all good curricula have one common element—the capacity to continue to change without the necessity of rebuilding the entire structure. A curriculum resistant to change runs the risk of becoming like the *Saber-Tooth Curriculum*. In Benjamin’s (1949) famous story, the curriculum in a prehistoric society was allowed to continue unchanged even while the world outside of school continued to change drastically. The saber-tooth curriculum remained static, crushing the initiative and creativity of students and faculty long after it was extinct because somehow it had become sacred, ritualistic, and frozen into a time and space that no longer existed.

In practice, the process of building a curriculum has no final step. Rather, what is often considered the final step is, in reality, the beginning of testing the ideas. From the first day of the first class of the implementation of the “new” or “revised” curriculum, feedback about implementation is received and this initiates planning for the next wave of changes. Courses must continually adjust, grow, and improve; teachers must develop new teaching skills, strategies, and tactics; and students must acquire new patterns of learning. All of this is part of curriculum, and it is a continuing process—a loop of trial, feedback, and alteration that supports students’ learning.

Final Thoughts

For us at TSTC, the consolidation of four colleges into one institution forced us to reexamine our

curriculum and the processes we use to determine our curriculum. Our reflection on the issues and questions presented above continue to aid us in our ongoing work in curriculum development as we strive to ensure our instructional programs are structured on relevant and dynamic curricula that best serve our students and the Texas workforce. This requires some sense of what is to be done, when, by whom, and how.

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