
PREFACE

By viewing a college curriculum as a plan, *Shaping the College Curriculum: Academic Plans in Context* encourages instructors and administrators to think about curriculum as a decision-making process with important implications for teaching and learning. The academic plan model we advocate reveals the complexity of curricular decision making, but also clarifies the process, thus enabling instructors and administrators to ask important questions about how curricula might optimize student learning. Updated and substantially revised since its original publication in 1997, this new volume serves as a resource for individuals and groups whose work includes planning, designing, delivering, evaluating, and studying curricula in higher education. Having used *Shaping the College Curriculum* as a text in our graduate courses and in professional development workshops for a number of years, we have learned first-hand how the academic plan concept enables faculty, administrators, and graduate students not only to grasp the complexity of postsecondary curricula, but to see the academic plan as a heuristic for designing curricula and guiding research on curricula. College and university administrators and faculty members, policy makers, researchers, graduate students, and others who share an interest in the improvement of teaching and learning in higher education will find valuable information to guide their practice. Today, concerns about what colleges and universities are teaching and how well, assessment and accountability demands from government agencies and funders, the rise of for-profit higher education, and advances in communications technology have

brought curricula and teaching under increased public scrutiny. The potential for change in postsecondary education is enormous. Our efforts aim to promote curriculum change that is guided, not misguided.

In this volume, we focus on the everyday realities of curriculum planning in colleges and universities. Like its predecessor, the revised *Shaping the College Curriculum* stresses research-based educational practices and addresses the concerns of instructors, administrators, and researchers who ask questions such as:

- How can instructors design courses that balance a focus on subject matter with attention to students' needs?
- How can instructors and programs accommodate students' diverse educational, social, and cultural backgrounds?
- What does research tell us about how to create educational experiences that effectively support students' learning?
- What impact do institutional and program contexts—missions, resources, cultures, and histories—have on curriculum planning?
- How can the results of courses and programs, as well as the achievements of students, be evaluated and improved?
- How can programs and institutions achieve needed curricular change in complex environments?
- How can administrators promote continuing attention to curricula and support a culture of improvement?

The academic plan concept, introduced and elaborated in the original *Shaping the College Curriculum*, provides the framework for this volume. However, because our thinking about academic plans is always evolving, this volume reflects refinements and extensions of our understanding of postsecondary curricula. For example, we have expanded our discussion of the sociocultural contexts in which students learn and curricula are created. This is reflected in the change in the subtitle of the volume—from “Academic Plans in Action” to “Academic Plans in Context.” An expanded review of theory and research on learning enhances our discussion of how the needs of learners can be addressed in the design of academic plans. A new chapter on curricular change builds on research on organizational change and provides practical guidance to assist faculty members and administrators who are considering and implementing substantial improvements in programs. Each chapter includes updated research findings relevant to curriculum planning, accreditation, teaching, and learning. Finally, information on curriculum planning in for-profit institutions and online education programs supplements our primary focus on planning in not-for-profit institutions.

To purposefully and effectively improve teaching and learning, educators must consider how educational research may be applied. Whether instructors and administrators are engaged in the ongoing task of curriculum revision for courses or programs, in revising general education requirements, incorporating new instructional technologies, or refining student evaluation, assessment, or program review processes, their work is enhanced when they are knowledgeable about research findings as well as about current practices. Those who study higher education—researchers and graduate students—also require resources that synthesize relevant theory, research, and practice so that investigations are well-grounded and well-informed. Accordingly, we have expanded our emphasis on the practical use of the academic plan concept in this revised volume while simultaneously building on past and current research to expand our framework, deepen our understandings of curriculum development and reform, and support our recommendations.

An Overview of the Contents

In 1997, we wrote, in the preface to *Shaping the College Curriculum*, “Faculty, administrators, and scholars need new ways of thinking about curriculum if they are to respond to current challenges and future demands for excellence in higher education.” The need for new thinking remains. To produce this revision, we asked ourselves what we had learned about postsecondary curricula, teaching, and learning since *Shaping the College Curriculum* was first published. We questioned our prior understandings and considered how new information from research, theory, and practice might add to—or alter—those ideas. We added two new chapters and rearranged content from existing chapters to facilitate use of the book by researchers, faculty, administrators, and graduate students. We also pruned carefully but purposefully, eliminating a few chapters entirely and substantially reworking others to promote understanding of essential issues.

In the first edition of *Shaping the College Curriculum*, the elements of the academic plan served as the organizational scheme for individual chapters. In this revision, the model still provides the backbone of the book, but it guides its overall conceptualization more fully than the organization of each chapter. The overview that follows briefly summarizes each chapter.

Chapter 1 sets the stage for an extended discussion of the development and revision of college and university curricula by explaining the academic plan model. We define academic plans, discussing each of the eight elements that comprise a plan—purpose, content, sequence, learners, instructional processes, instructional materials, evaluation, and adjustment. We also introduce the concept

of educational contexts, particularly noting the many influences—social, cultural, historical, and institutional—that shape postsecondary curricula.

Having defined the concept of the academic plan in Chapter 1, we explore in Chapters 2, 3, and 4 the variety of influences that affect curriculum planning in colleges and universities. Each chapter treats a different, but critical, set of influences. Chapter 2 provides an historical overview of social, cultural, economic, and political forces and debates that have shaped higher education curricula in the United States. Chapter 2 also presents current information on the nation's higher education institutions and student populations. Existing educational structures both constrain and facilitate curriculum planning and reform. By tracing the evolution of several elements of the academic plan (for example, educational missions and goals, content, instructional processes, learners, and evaluation), this chapter reveals the sources of contemporary thinking about postsecondary programs, teaching, and learning as it provides an historical perspective on the current state of higher education in the United States.

Different histories lead to different institutional structures and cultures that can significantly affect educational decision making and processes. In Chapter 3, therefore, we examine the varying organizational structures and cultures of colleges and universities (for example, research universities, community colleges, liberal arts colleges, for-profit institutions), consolidating information about institutional characteristics and influences that was embedded in several chapters in the original *Shaping the College Curriculum*. This chapter will be particularly useful for those with limited familiarity with different higher education sectors and how variations in institutional characteristics generally affect curricular and teaching practices; in short, it offers a primer on faculty and administrative roles and responsibilities in U.S. colleges and universities.

Although college and university missions, structures, and cultures are important influences on faculty members as they plan curricula, the influence of academic fields on course planning, program planning, and educational beliefs is pervasive. In Chapter 4 we rely on research about course planning to help readers understand how instructors in different fields of study approach the task at the course and program levels. Since views about course planning and teaching vary by discipline, this chapter is essential to understanding why instructors from different fields have different views of what and how they should teach. Tapping the knowledge base about the influence of academic fields on faculty work, we describe how socialization in an academic field shapes an instructor's course planning decisions and complicates program and college-wide planning. Importantly, Chapter 4 recommends strategies for sensitizing instructors to the assumptions they bring to the table when they engage in curriculum planning and the sources of their disagreements, thus suggesting how educators might bridge differences to enable curricular improvements.

With Chapter 5 we begin a multi-chapter discussion of curriculum planning that describes current strategies for course and program planning, considers research and theory about learners and learning, and discusses the implications of this information for the development of instructional processes, as well as for the effective evaluation and improvement of academic plans. Chapter 5 focuses on current curricular planning processes at the course, program, and institutional levels. Our review of research on course planning allows us to contrast what college and university instructors typically do when planning courses with what they might do more effectively in a purposeful and ongoing curriculum planning process.

We turn our attention to learners in Chapter 6. To provide the groundwork for improved attention to learners and learning, we present an interdisciplinary treatment of how students learn drawn from the fields of education, cognitive psychology, educational psychology, anthropology, and sociology. This introduction to the complex phenomenon of human learning emphasizes intellectual development and thinking, but also considers how personal characteristics such as academic preparation, interests, and cultural background influence can influence what is learned as students interact with course content, peers, and instructors.

College and university instructors are typically unfamiliar with research on learning, but should be aware of its many implications for the purposeful design and delivery of courses and programs. In Chapter 7, we offer many empirically or theoretically grounded recommendations for improving instructional processes at the course, program, and college levels. Each section of this chapter builds on the research findings on learning discussed in Chapter 6.

In Chapter 8 we turn to evaluation and adjustment, the final two elements of the academic plan model. We describe current practices in course and program evaluation, but also suggest procedures and systems to encourage periodic, rather than episodic, review of curricula at the course, program, and institutional levels. The chapter covers classroom assessment techniques, program review approaches, accreditation, and college-wide assessment programs—all of which are increasingly prominent in the minds of educators in an era of heightened demands for accountability and quality assurance.

The final chapters of *Shaping the College Curriculum* treat the issues of improvement and innovation in academic planning. In Chapter 9 we discuss administrative responsibility for, and leadership of, curriculum development and improvement processes. In doing so, we return once more to the academic plan model elaborated in the early chapters of the book, highlighting the local educational environment in which curriculum plans are constructed. Although faculty members, as experts in their academic fields, are responsible for academic planning in not-for-profit colleges and universities, administrators have a critical role to play in creating a supportive environment in which experimentation and innovation can be pursued. Administrators are also responsible for helping instructors recognize and respond successfully to

external challenges that might influence curricula in colleges and universities. This chapter includes many practical checklists that can help instructors and administrators assess and promote the efficacy of their curriculum planning efforts.

Curriculum change in higher education is often portrayed as a slow, tedious, and contentious process—but does it have to be so? Chapter 10 is devoted to the issue of curricular change, assuming that, while innovation is a regular feature of academic life in institutions committed to improvement, any change presents a challenge. This chapter synthesizes recent research on organizational and curricular change to identify principles and conditions that facilitate improvement. From this review, we have drawn many practical recommendations for productive renewal and innovation processes. Ideally, curriculum change is a continuous and collaborative learning process in which faculty members and administrators work together to learn what works and why.

Acknowledgements

Many individuals contributed to the completion of this volume. India McHale and Jennifer Domagal-Goldman, doctoral students and graduate research assistants in the Higher Education program at Penn State, devoted many hours to research for the book and more hours than they will wish to recall to fact-checking, table and figure construction, formatting, and the reference list. India and Jen supplied sharp minds, good humor, and moral support at crucial times, and their work is greatly appreciated. In addition, a number of other graduate students at Penn State researched specific issues for this volume. Most have since completed their degrees and taken faculty or administrative positions in higher education. We are grateful to Christian Anderson, Sam Museus, Joan Pecht, and Stephen Quaye for their valuable contributions. Publishing technologies have changed since *Shaping the College Curriculum* was first published in 1997, and Beverly Ladrado, administrative assistant in the Center for the Study of Higher Education, effectively bridged the gap for us, updating computer files from the first edition so that we had a reasonable facsimile of each chapter to work on for this revised volume.

Colleagueship is the lifeblood of academia and many friends in the field have encouraged us over the years to produce this revised volume. We thank them for that encouragement, as well as for their insights, from which we benefitted as we wrote the new *Shaping the College Curriculum*. Finally, we are exceptionally indebted to Josephine Lattuca and Malcolm Lowther, who patiently and lovingly waited for us to be done.