

## Story: Blue Ridge University - Building a General Education Program for 2030

I'm Jane Hampton, Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Blue Ridge University. This story describes how we applied the principles of curation and collaboration to meet four key aims that President Jolene Crowder set for the transformation of Blue Ridge's General Education Program. These aims included:

- Vitaly connect the new curriculum with learners' general education needs in the emerging Knowledge, Work and Learning Ecosystem of 2030 and beyond and require them to achieve minimum competence on all program outcomes. Assessment of competence should occur in a capstone course and demonstration of minimum competence should be required for the granting of a baccalaureate degree.
- Build a program that is riveted on learner needs, unique, coherent and simple, and driven by Blue Ridge's values.
- Make maximal use of technology, first and foremost to heighten appeal and learning, but also to enhance scalability and external marketability. The program should draw significantly on the advanced capabilities of a wide range of potential collaborators in the marketplace.
- Protect faculty employment, but transform the role they play in the general education process to that of guide, mentor and assessor.



### ***Getting Started***

In collaboration with senior faculty leaders, the Provost, SVP for Finance and Operations and the Deans, we constructed an *ad hoc coalition* to design the new program and help with its implementation. It included influential faculty who had a vital, enlightened interest in general education and the use of technology to improve learning, three human resources executives from key progressive corporations in Charlotte, and the leaders of the University's instructional design team. I chaired the coalition. The SVP Finance and Operations sat in to help our team with negotiations with for-profit collaborating organizations to make sure we were negotiating the best deal possible deal.

Most of the internal members of the coalition had served on other ad hoc coalitions and, in addition, I was a member of the Guiding Coalition for the University transformation process. This background gave us a head start in that we knew how to work effectively together and understood that our job was to transform the program and what that entailed.

We started by completing a *Planning from the Future Backwards* exercise to see what general education outcomes would be needed to prepare learners for 2030 and beyond. Many of the basic outcomes stayed the same—but others were added to consider into account the projected 2030 needs and the imperative to take full advantage of the rich array of new offerings from external collaborators. The outside HR leaders and our CFO added much to the conversation about these outcomes. We worked hard to focus the curriculum outcomes directly on the needs of the learner.

We used a number of the design tools presented in the book and developed a curriculum that was organized around these key themes: *communication, problem solving, responsible citizenship in a cyber world, and maintaining an intellectual, professional, and personal edge through life*. We developed these ideas and decided we should approach a collaborator in the for-profit world to see if we could work with them to redeploy the resources they had developed and jointly build courses that would address the new learning areas we had identified. StraighterLine, a provider of online general education courses and an outstanding partner, worked with us to develop new courses in the responsible cyber citizenship and the maintenance of an edge areas.



### ***Resulting Curriculum***

The result was a *tight, 30-credit curriculum* that had to be completed and assessed before the end of the sophomore year. The curriculum included courses on “maintaining your edge” and “responsible citizenship”—both with a focus on requirements for 2030 and beyond. The maintaining your edge course required a student to develop a one-credit DIY experience, gain a certificate in an area related to their major, and develop a personal 60-year learning plan. The curriculum was offered in a hybrid format to give the students a feel for what higher learning would be like for them in the years ahead.

The capstone/assessment course had students work in five-person teams to solve a large-scale problem to demonstrate their capability to meet all of the general education curriculum’s

outcomes. To gauge how well our students were doing in relation to their peers at other institutions, we had them sit for the ETS Proficiency Profile examination during the capstone course. We also asked them to assess the adequacy of the general education curriculum during the course and five years after graduation.

### ***Five-Year Transition Plans for Faculty***

The question of what we would do with faculty teaching in the traditional general education courses was a challenging one. President Crowder asked us to develop a *five-year transition plan for these faculty*. From the outset in the implementation phase, we were up front with the faculty that they were welcome in the new general education program if they were willing to work in one of the new positions in that program. These included mentors for the students taking the new curriculum, assessors, curriculum developers, and instructors in the newly designed courses. A handful chose to retire, but the majority found a home in the new curriculum and transitioned well. Because the new curriculum aroused interest across the country and we worked with Straighterline to deliver it at other institutions, we ended up not only using all of the existing faculty, but we also added several positions. By the five-year mark set by the president, the total cost of offering this program was about half of that of the traditional program it replaced.



### ***Communicate, Communicate, and Then Communicate Some More***

Throughout the process of building and implementing the program, we worked hard to communicate with all University constituencies about what we were doing and listening hard to the feedback we received. This communication effort paid off handsomely, because we got a lot of people involved in the development of the program and excited about its potential.

### ***Learner Satisfaction and Outcomes***

Learner satisfaction with the program overall was 4.8 out of 5 points. To all it was clear that the transformation of the general education program was a remarkable success and a significant cost saver.

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Note (We can turn this into a standard footnote format.