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Establishing Institutional Frameworks for Effective Course-Redesign in Large-Enrolment First-Year Courses

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Establishing Institutional Frameworks for Effective Course-Redesign in Large-Enrolment First-Year Courses

This is Report 2 of a 2-part study.

Background: When completing institutional initiatives to enhance student success and retention, a multitude of factors come into play. Not only must researchers and practitioners identify factors contributing to non-success, but they also must be able to ask the right types of investigative questions, access and properly analyse the data necessary for the answers; identify, develop, and evaluate proper interventions or other measures; and navigate the various institutional and political systems while doing so. Needless to say, this is a feat that has yet to be systematized by many higher education institutions. While some research has reported on various inquiry methods, or approaches to course redesign, and even ways in which to make economical and sustainable decisions, there has yet to be an in-depth account of what these initiatives really entail, and how best to approach them in a systematic way that decreases costs while increasing positive student outcomes.

Purpose: The purpose of this study was to understand what factors affect the success of course redesign initiatives, how these processes are experienced by various members of the teams and the institution, and how best to systematize such approaches at an institutional level. The primary outcome of this project was an institutional framework for course redesign which could be further tested and refined.

Method: This project used the redesign of two first-year economics courses as a case study, completing action research using the inquiry and course redesign team members as participants. Each of the 11 individuals involved in the core project completed semi-weekly journals submitted to the project manager for analysis. Overall, 179 documents (including journals and meeting notes) were reviewed and analyzed thematically. The team also used secondary data (demographics, course performance, survey, etc.) collected for the purposes of the course redesign itself to narrow the focus of research questions, data, and necessary processes required for successful course redesign. The culmination of all data was used to develop a preliminary framework for course redesign, in order to assist others through the process.

Findings: Highlighted throughout this process is the need to address courses from a systems perspective. Above all else, the course exists within various systems that interact with each other in complicated ways, which means that the factors surrounding the course itself, and students' experiences within the course should be addressed throughout the redesign process. The case study involved 23 individuals from nine institutional units in order to complete various aspects of the research and development required for thorough course inquiry and the development of new components. However, it was also noted that instructor autonomy should be maintained in balance with mutual respect, trust, and consistent communication within such multifunctional teams for them to be most effective. It was also suggested that the institution develop a system for instructors and other stakeholders to more readily access data relevant to their courses. Doing this would eliminate substantial organizational road blocks and time delays in projects, thereby making more efficient use of institutional resources, and limiting unnecessary stress on individual team members. A course redesign framework was proposed, which should be used in conjunction with a set of questions forming our inquiry framework, guiding teams through the process. Further evaluations and refinement of this framework will be completed.