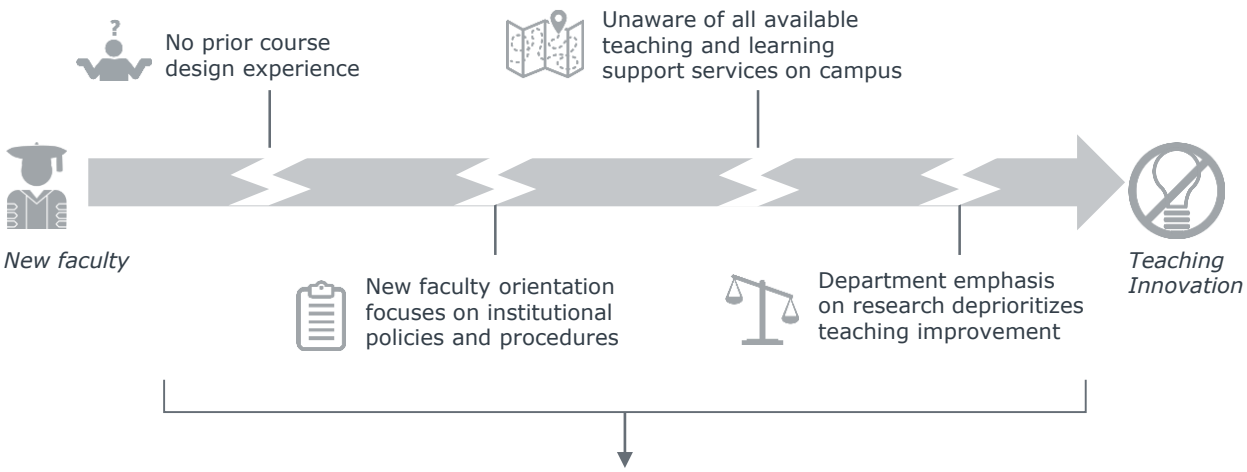
Frontload Course Development by Creating Intensive Course Design Institutes

Navigating Uncharted Territory

Without Rigorous Upfront Teaching Support Faculty Less Likely to Innovate

There are many factors that disincentivize faculty teaching innovation, this is most apparent when considering new faculty. PhD programs help aspiring professors become subject matter experts but often do not include coursework on the fundamentals of teaching. New faculty inadvertently begin their career with limited course design experience. New faculty orientation often serves as an introduction to institutional policies and procedures and is not always a mechanism to provide "on-the-job" training.



Barriers to Innovative, Student-Centered Teaching Creates Opportunity for Upfront Course Design Support

Multi-day course development intensives help faculty learn about the key elements of learning-focused teaching and helps them create better designed courses

Even if faculty know who to turn to for teaching and learning support the tenure rat race disincentivizes prioritizing teaching improvement. These barriers create a need for upfront course design support which will save faculty from having to redesign their courses in the future and will create a culture of teaching innovation across campus. One way to do this is through multi-day course design institutes (CDIs).

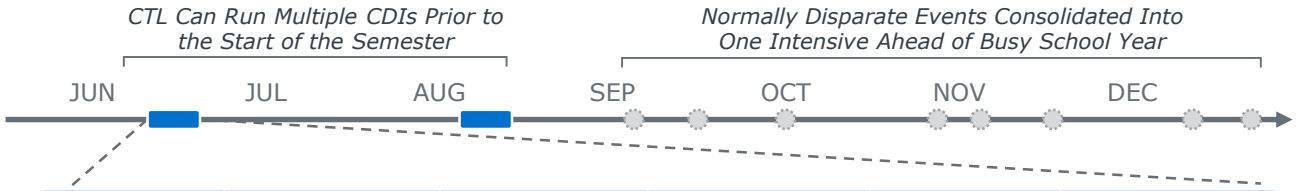
Source: EAB interviews and analysis.

Frontloading Course Development Activities

Course Design Institutes Cover Essential Elements of Student-Centered Teaching

Most Centers of Teaching and Learning (CTL) operate such intensive institutes to bring faculty together to design new courses or revamp existing ones. These can take place at any time during the academic year, but many institutions opt to offer them during the summer. This frontloads course development support so that faculty do not have to participate in course design activities during the busy school year. The multi-day program often covers learning theory and provides hands-on support to faculty. After participating in the program faculty can devote a bulk of their time during the academic year on their research and other institutional obligations.

Sample Course Design Institute Schedule[1]



	Day One	Day Two	Day Three	Day Four	Day Five
9:00 am	Understanding student motivations	Developing learning goals and objectives	Scaffolding, pacing, and interleaving learning	Developing the course schedule	Exchanging syllabi
10:45 am	Overview of learning-focused syllabi	Principles of assessment	Principles of active learning	Feedback and grading	Implementing the design
1:00 pm	Principles of course design	Designing effective learning assignments	Exploring learning activities;	Individual work	Submit near-final/final syllabus
2:30 pm	Individual work and consultations with CDI faculty and/or students				
Homework (sample)	*Create new learner-focused course description*	*Draft descriptions of major assessment activities*	*Determine overall instructional strategy*	*Define grading scheme*	

1) Adapted from Course Design Institute schedule conducted by the Center for Teaching Excellence at the University of Virginia

Source: UVA CTE, EAB interviews and analysis.

Time-Bound Support for Course Design

Ensuring that Course Design Institutes Provide Effective and Actionable Support

Typical CDIs usually cover learning theory and important elements of effective courses such as learning outcomes, assessment, and class activities. However, most CDIs often neglect to include some key elements of a successful program: dedicated time to receive an outside perspective on their course through peer and staff feedback, ability to apply concepts learned by developing a course syllabus, and a mechanism to evaluate the course redesign.

COMMON ELEMENTS OF CDIs

Faculty are introduced to learner-centered pedagogical theory and practice

Participants learn about the elements of effective course design including active learning and learning outcomes assessment

KEY COMPONENTS OF SUCCESSFUL CDIs

CDI includes opportunity for peer, student, and CTL staff feedback and collaboration about course design

Faculty apply the theory they learn by ending the CDI with a complete or near-complete syllabus

Rigorous syllabus rubric or guide helps shape and evaluate CDI activities

Rollins College EST. 1885

Ferris State University

University of Virginia

TCU

Saint Louis University

University of Delaware

Institutions should leverage the cohorted nature of CDIs to ensure that faculty have dedicated time to work together, across disciplines, to provide feedback and learn new teaching and course design strategies. Effective CDIs create opportunities for faculty to apply learning theory by ensuring that faculty end their CDI participation with a complete or near-complete syllabus – this not only saves faculty time but also allows them to troubleshoot in the moment with their cohort and CDI support staff. Given the investments made in course design support, CDIs should ensure that faculty are able to evaluate the efficacy of their new course designs. One way to do so is to use a syllabus rubric to evaluate the extent to which a syllabus is learning-focused (as opposed to content-focused).

Source: Course Design institute, University of Virginia; Course Design Institute, University of Delaware; Course (Re)Design institute, Rollins College; TCU Course Design Institute, Texas Christian University; Course Design Institute, Ferris State University; Course Design Institute, Saint Louis University, EAB interviews and analysis.

Evaluating Our Efforts

Detailed Guide Helps Faculty Create Learning-Focused Syllabi

Case Study

University of Virginia's syllabus rubric was designed as a quantitative measure to evaluate the impact of CDI participation on faculty syllabi. The rubric measures the degree to which a syllabus is learner-centered by placing syllabi on a spectrum from content-focused (score of 0-18) to learning-focused (score of 41-58). It consists of five categories with 16 components and includes qualitative descriptions of each element.

Rubric Breaks Down Elements of Learning-Focused Course

Learning Goals & Objectives	Assessment Activities	Course Schedule	Classroom Environment	Learning Activities
• Cover Fink's dimensions of significant learning • Clearly articulated • Appropriately pitched to course-level and sequence in curriculum	• Assessments and grading aligned with objectives • Includes clearly defined summative and frequent formative assessments • Adequately paced with increasing complexity	• Fully articulated and logically sequenced	• Tone is positive, respectful, & inviting • Fosters positive motivation and describes value of course • Communicated high expectations and projects confidence • Syllabus easy to navigate	• Aligned with learning objectives • Derived from evidence-based practice • Actively engage students

Scoring Places Syllabi on Scale Creating Opportunities for Improvement

The five criteria are typical components of learning-centered syllabi such as learning goals and objectives, assessment activities, schedule, overall learning environment, and learning activities. The scoring spectrum helps faculty identify areas for improvement. In addition to providing detailed descriptions of each element the rubric also highlights parts of a syllabus where each component is typically found. This not only makes assessment easier it also gives faculty advice about how to develop their syllabi.

1) Fink, L. D. (2013a). Creating significant learning experiences: an integrated approach to designing college courses (2nd ed.). San-Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Source: Palmer, M. S., Bach, D. J., & Streifer, A. C. (2014). Measuring the promise: A learning-focused syllabus rubric. To improve the academy: A journal of educational development, 33 (1), 14-36.

Critical Elements of Syllabus Rubric

Actionable Advice and Weighted Scoring Helps Faculty Prioritize and Improve

Each of the 16 components is designated as essential, important, or less-important[1]. This is reflected by the weighted scores assigned to each element and allows faculty to prioritize including the most important components. The elements are scored on the "strength of supporting evidence". For example, strong evidence indicates that many of the characteristics of the component are present in the syllabus and match the descriptions closely while low evidence indicates that very few of the characteristics of the component are present in the syllabus and/or don't match the descriptions.

UNIVERSITY of VIRGINIA

Criterion2	Component	Detailed Guidance2	Strength of Evidence		
			Strong	Moderate	Low
			x2	x1	x0
Learning Goals & Objectives	Course level learning objectives are clearly articulated and use specific action verbs	Course-level learning objectives are in a prominent and easily identifiable location		3	
Assessment Activities	Objectives and assessments are aligned	Each major assessment activity maps to one or more learning objectives	3		
	Major summative assessment activities are clearly defined	Major assignments are described briefly (i.e., a paragraph or two)			2
	Plans for frequent formative assessment with immediate feedback	Examples of formative assessments include use of clickers, informal writing assignments, and group discussions	1		
Classroom Environment	Fosters positive motivation, describes value of the course, promotes content as a vehicle of learning	Instructor uses pre-course student information (e.g. pre-course exams and surveys) to tailor the learning environment to student needs		2	

1. Helps develop an inclusive learning environment by ensuring that students are in control of their own learning by emphasizing mastery-based grading instead of norm-referenced grading

2. Rubric includes detailed, actionable descriptions of each component

3. Each component is categorized[1] and weighted to ensure instructors include the most important ones

4. Scoring criteria helps identify areas to improve

1) Essential elements are blue, important elements are light blue, and less-important elements are grey
2) Adapted from UVA's syllabus rubric, available here

Source: Palmer, M. S., Bach, D. J., & Streifer, A. C. (2014). Measuring the promise: A learning-focused syllabus rubric. *To improve the academy: A journal of educational development*, 33 (1), 14-36.Palmer, M.S., Streifer, A.C., & Williams-Duncan, S. (2016). Systematic assessment of a high impact course design institute. *To improve the academy: A journal of educational development, 35(2)*, 339-361; EAB interviews and analysis.

Syllabus Rubric Helps Evaluate CDI Efficacy

CDI Participation Improves Student Outcomes and Faculty Confidence

At UVA the syllabus rubric has been an effective tool to measure the impact of CDI participation. After analyzing 54 pre and post-CDI syllabi pairs, they found that CDI participation helped faculty create more learning-focused syllabi. In fact, the average instructor was expected to gain 60.4% of the points possible to them regardless of their pre-CDI syllabus scores. Moreover, UVA has found that CDI participation has increased faculty confidence in their ability to use more student-centered teaching practices in their courses.

Courses with inclusive syllabi reduced gap in DFW rates between URG and majority STEM students

CDI participation increased faculty confidence in their ability to use student-centered teaching activities

+450 faculty exposed to rubric through week-long course design workshop

> "The syllabus is extremely comprehensive but also **gets me excited to work with the teacher** and participate in the class."
>
> "I like how they **emphasize the realistic aspects of learning and participating** rather than simply laying out work to be done."
>
> Students' perception of learning-focused syllabi at UVA

An analysis of the impact of learning-focused and inclusive syllabi on student outcomes found that such syllabi reduced the gap in DFW rates between underrepresented and majority students. Moreover, shifting from a content-focused to learning-focused syllabus energized students to learn and participate in classes and helped them feel prepared for what the course entailed.

Source: Michael S. Palmer, Lindsay B. Wheeler & Itiya Aneece (2016) Does the Document Matter? The Evolving Role of Syllabi in Higher Education, Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning, 48:4, 36-47, EAB interviews and analysis.

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