

## Introduction to the Special Issue: Curricular Coherence as an Instructional, Ethical, and Equity-Minded Imperative

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When we first conceived the idea of a special issue on curricular coherence in 2019, we had no idea that the world was about to be beset by a global health crisis unprecedented in modern memory, never mind that the very nature of teaching and learning at our institutions would change so dramatically and so rapidly. Now, in the summer of 2021, this issue is being released at a time of great uncertainty for undergraduate education in the United States, a time of collective wrestling with hard questions that have both pragmatic and existential implications. What does “normal” look like post-COVID? As educators, how can we ensure that our students have access to the very best teaching, learning, and assessment that we have to offer? And more to the point, is what we offer indeed the “very best”?

It is in this context that curricular coherence takes on even greater importance. It is an issue that the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) highlighted as early as two decades ago (Shoenberg, 2000) and is excited to address through this special issue of the *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*. The assembled research and praxis manuscripts herein represent the collective wisdom derived through projects generously funded by the Teagle Foundation between 2013 and 2018 that were designed to make our curricular structures more robust, more transparent, and when appropriate and necessary, more efficient for students. Four of the institutions—the University of Houston-Downtown, the Community College of Philadelphia, Winston-Salem State University, and the University of Nevada Las Vegas—engaged in this work through AAC&U’s Teagle-funded project, Purposeful Pathways: Faculty Planning for Curricular Coherence. The other institutions whose work is found in this special issue—some individually and others as part of a consortium—highlight the empirical and practical findings of their Teagle-funded projects. Each manuscript provides a candid deep dive into individual campus contexts, lessons learned, missteps, and successes. The final manuscript, a reprint of a synthesis of results from multiple institutions supported in the earliest rounds of funding, delineates different approaches to achieving curricular coherence (e.g., general education redesign, curricular mapping, leveraging high-impact educational practices in classroom

pedagogy) as well as highlights collective lessons learned regarding the campus cultural and contextual conditions that must be addressed if curricular coherence efforts are to be successfully enacted.

From our vantage point, in addition to the findings captured by the assembled manuscripts, we identified three findings that are critical to curricular coherence efforts: (a) curricular coherence should be framed as an *instructional innovation* (Furco & Moely, 2012) rather than an administrative or structural change; (b) curricular coherence efforts, and potentially other perceived high-stakes institutional initiatives, benefit from the identification and adoption of a theory of change; and (c) curricular coherence is an ethical imperative, with significant potential to address pervasive issues of equity and inclusive excellence.

First, we firmly believe that curricular coherence should be framed pedagogically, given the critical role that faculty engagement plays in the success or failure of such efforts. (Our selection of a journal dedicated to the scholarship of teaching and learning for a special issue on curricular coherence is, we hope, an indication of our efforts to begin this framing.) In order for faculty to perceive an instructional innovation as worthy of their engagement, those managing the initiative need to ensure that the rationale for the efforts align with faculty values and concerns, that faculty have resources to engage in sensemaking vis-à-vis curricular coherence through professional development that does not require an exorbitant amount of their time, that they see rewards—up to and including credit within promotion and tenure metrics—for their participation, and finally that the institution demonstrates a deep and abiding commitment to the innovation (Furco & Moely, 2012). Faculty today are keenly attuned to issues of initiative fatigue, particularly when change is proposed for change’s sake. It is critical to create conditions to help mitigate concerns that faculty efforts will fall flat when institutional attention shifts.

To that end, our second finding—that identifying and adopting a theory of change to is key—is also critical. Taking faculty’s experiences with and perceptions of change into account represents an important, albeit often neglected, consideration. Understanding the effect and quality of curricular coherence efforts is key to an initiative’s short-term success and to future institutional capacity-building in this space. For our project, we employed the concerns-

based adoption model (CBAM) as our theory of change. CBAM (Hall & Hord, 2006) defines change as a process that is made by individuals first, then made by institutions. CBAM's framework includes three components: (1) assessing individual stages of concern, (2) identifying levels of use, and (3) developing and disseminating innovation configuration guidelines for the change, a critical piece of this project that is designed to address documented challenges in the appropriate dissemination and subsequent adoption of best practices in undergraduate education. Our cohort leveraged CBAM to monitor faculty engagement, better understand multiple layers of concern and levels of use, and position curricular coherence to address concerns as they varied over time. CBAM worked for us, but we are not attempting to promote a favorite theory of change. Rather, we hope the manuscripts in this issue highlight how using a theory of change can help scaffold, shepherd, and scale the work.

Last, we believe that achieving curricular coherence for all our students is an ethical imperative, one with significant equity implications. Curricular coherence implicates any number of possible strategies, and it can be tempting to employ a “kitchen sink” approach, throwing every strategy at every academic program or every student in the hope that something within the mix will collectively enhance student success. Based on our work within this project as well as in fulfilling AAC&U’s mission to make quality and equity the hallmarks of excellence in undergraduate education, we strongly suggest another approach.

An important first step toward curricular coherence at all institutions is to interrogate to what degree the curriculum is—or is not—coherent for the entire student body. This requires digging into institutional data and engaging in not only simple disaggregation of student success metrics (e.g., graduation rates or DFW rates) in key gateway classes, but rather engaging in intersectional disaggregation of data “to more precisely identify those subpopulations that were experiencing the largest equity gaps” (McNair, Bensimon, & Malcolm-Piqueux, 2020, p. 75). Additionally, disaggregation alone does not result in more equitable approaches to curricular coherence. Rather, it is a starting point for what McNair et al. (2020) referred to as “equity-minded sensemaking,” which

goes beyond examining data and noticing equity gaps in outcomes. It involves interpreting equity gaps as a signal that practices are not working as intended and asking equity-minded questions about how and why current practices are failing to serve students experiencing inequities. (p. 61)

Without this level of interrogation of current praxis, an institution—no matter how well-intended—could

expend a great deal of time and effort only to find that their version of curricular coherence, however well-organized on paper, fails its students.

While important pre-pandemic, curricular coherence—as an instructional innovation and an ethical and equity-minded imperative—is even more critical moving forward. As the nature of undergraduate instruction continues to change and institutions must work harder to attract, retain, and graduate students, we must improve our collective ability to transparently guide our increasingly diverse student body through undergraduate curricula toward success in work and life must improve. This special issue is intended to expand the conversation on curricular coherence and catalyze new efforts and approaches that build upon our best understanding of what we know about teaching, learning, and assessment.

## References

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KATE DREZEK McCONNELL, PhD, is Vice President for Curricular and Pedagogical Innovation and Executive Director of VALUE. Prior to taking on this role, Dr. McConnell served as AAC&U's Assistant Vice President for Research and Assessment and Director of the VALUE Institute, AAC&U's nationwide assessment system that enables any higher education provider (e.g., institution, PCE program, academic department, state, consortium) to collect and upload samples of student work to a digital repository and have the work scored by certified VALUE Institute scorers for external validation of institutional learning assessment. An educational psychologist by training, Dr. McConnell has written extensively on the reliability and validity of the VALUE approach to assessment. Her other research and campus consultations focus on using course-embedded assessment to improve teaching and learning while also addressing accountability and accreditation requirements; course-embedded assessment; aligning pedagogy with assessment efforts; faculty development; and leveraging the learning sciences in teaching, assessment, and evaluation. Before joining AAC&U, Dr. McConnell spent 10 years

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