

Hatching Eggs: A Curriculum Incubator

Neil Kleinman 24 October 2012

Overview

The curriculum incubator proposed here was developed during a recent review of graduate programs at the University of the Arts as a way to start new graduate programs without disrupting current ones. Although conceived with the University of the Arts in mind, it speaks to problems at many universities.

It is rooted in the belief that today's solutions will not come from our institutional leaders but rather from the grassroots. What traditional leaders can do is provide a framework that supports innovation. They need to accept the fact that they may not have answers to today's problems and, even when they do, may be constrained by institutional pressures.

Based on the experience of lean-starts, a "curriculum incubator" draws on the entrepreneurial principles of "scarce but secure resources," "independent authority," and "a personal stake in the outcome," as well as on the principles of rapid prototyping, recognizing the requirements of the end user, and modifying what doesn't work. Admittedly, it is a conservative, not radical, approach

to institutional change—filling a new bucket before throwing out the water in the old one.

Why?

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A “graying” faculty carries on its back the burdens of its disciplines, shaped 30 or more years ago, and often shaped by a backward glance. The opportunities of new media, new distribution systems, and new hybrid disciplines ask us to look forward. We find that our students graduate unprepared for the economy they enter and carrying their own burdens, including significant debt and unemployment. In another day, an education lasted a lifetime, as long as the careers we prepared our students for. Perhaps it is not extreme to say that curricula now need to be replaced every five to seven years, a time frame somewhat similar to that of current “careers,” and the collegial way we design curricula does not encourage such a rapid pace.

What's called for?

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We need a strategy that promotes change and innovation without risking significant resources. The anxiety connected to risking resources is often the rationale for delay. We need a strategy that gives the “start-up” a space

to test itself before anxiety shuts it down. New ideas are often tabled simply because they seem too raw or at odds with the established view of how “the discipline” should look or be taught.

What’s needed, then, is something of a “conservative” strategy—the means to “de-risk” both the investment of monies and reduce the anxiety born from turning away from the established way of doing things. The lean start-up provides clues to this strategy.

Principles

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The operating principles for a curriculum incubator are drawn directly from the principles used in what is called the “lean start-up” and found in curricular development at schools like Babson College.

1. Resources must be **scarce** (or lean) and **secure**. Limited resources lead to inventiveness, encourage partnerships, and, most importantly, reduce the anxiety that a new idea will sink the rest of the institution. It is always easier to add resources to an idea that works than to take them away when it doesn’t. “Scarce” is not the same as “erratic.” Once agreed to, the resources and funding need to be predictable at least for the term agreed to.
2. Those working on an approved proposal must have **independent authority** to carry it off. They must

be freed of the need to get approval from others. Independent authority allows those running the project to make mid-course corrections, to redefine the goals and benchmarks they are using, and to take advantage of what they learn as they move through the effort.

3. Those working on an approved program must have a **personal stake** in its creation and execution. They don't require a promise of financial gain. But they do require a commitment to the idea and must be able to see a relationship between their effort and the results. They must believe that the success of an idea is their success, something they can acknowledge and be acknowledged for. This need to see an idea succeed is critical to its success. People committed to a venture and its success will invest their time and take risks, even professional risks, because the idea and its success are more important to them than their short-term professional and personal goals.

Rules

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A curriculum incubator operates as an investment fund, normally with funds sufficient to support released time for the principals and monies to support a full- or part-time faculty hire sometime during the probationary period. In order to assure institutional credibility and professional

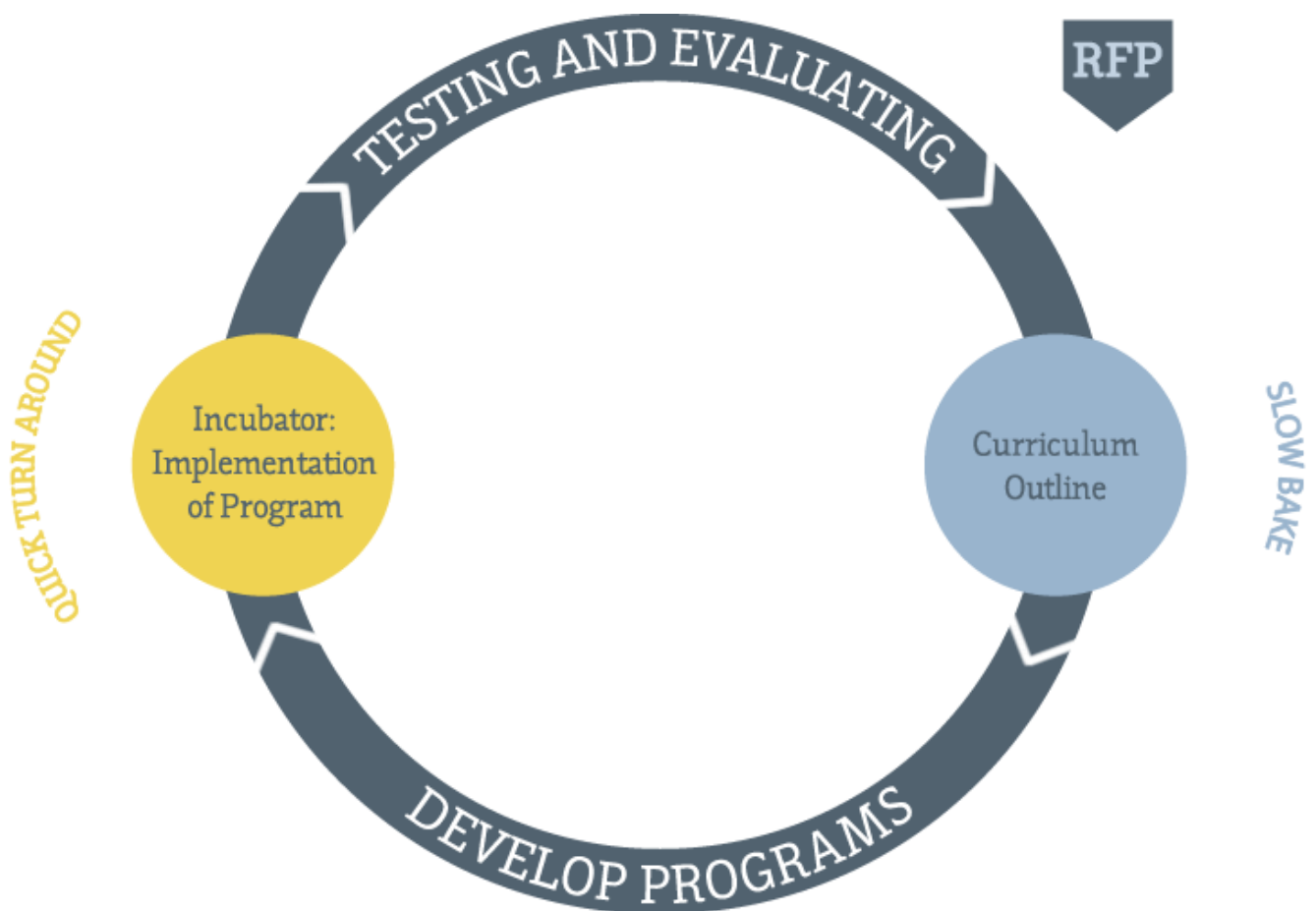
objectivity, its board must consist of members drawn from the faculty, administration and (importantly) the public—entrepreneurs, angel fund investors, and experienced professionals—all serving on three-year, staggered terms.

A proposal should be evaluated with three questions in mind:

1. Does the proposal merit addition to the university's curriculum? Is it something the university should invest in because it adds value to the educational program?
2. Has the proponent demonstrated that s/he is willing to invest in it too? Is s/he willing to invest the time and energy required with no guarantee of success?
3. Is there a clear, demonstrable demand for the program? Will potential students find it attractive? Will potential employers find its graduates a valuable addition to their ventures?

The incubator board must have the power to authorize and provisionally approve a new program. This form of approval allows the program to admit its first class while the program is still being shaped, with final approval to come after the first class graduates. Flying the plane as one builds it perhaps seems foolhardy, especially to academics, but it is important. The interaction between the curriculum builders and the students tests the idea, makes it more responsive, and produces a program that is vital and uniquely framed.

A quick start does not mean that the hard part has passed. Far from it. During its probationary period (two or three years), there must be ongoing scrutiny and evaluation, from inside, from outside, by participants and by observers. Does it teach what is promised and prepare its students to meet the standards of the profession and careers they wish to enter? Does it attract the number of students required to maintain quality and assure sustainability? Does it have the support of faculty and the community?



Curriculum Incubator: The Process

FAQs

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What happens to students when a program does not meet its goals and must be closed?

Programs are closed, even traditionally developed ones. When that happens, students either finish the program or transfer to another. This is no different. For that matter, we should consider all programs, those with a ten-year or a three-year history, as being on probation. What is important is candor—candor to the student about the reasons for the program and the risks involved in enrolling—and agreed upon exit strategies for all involved.

Would students want to enroll in a program that is provisional?

A new curriculum won't appeal to everyone, neither students nor faculty. But in all things, there are early adopters, excited by the adventure, excited by the prospects of a new way of putting ideas and skills together, and excited by the chance to help to define this new way. It is this opportunity that makes participation particularly exciting and memorable. It makes the program "their" program as much as that of the faculty or the incubator board.

How can one avoid a proposed curriculum being appealing only because it is "novel" or "surprising"?

The incubator's board must behave as though it is

investing its own money. Its members must question all the assumptions, consider the values, the demand, and the goals, and establish realistic metrics. Once they have approved it, they must be ready to provide ongoing support. They must know how to step in with advice as well as when to step out and close it down. Under such conditions, it's unlikely that the simply novel ideas will be approved or considered.

What do terms like "prototyping" and "lean start-ups" have to do with education and curriculum development?

"Prototyping" refers to the practice of building a model to test an idea, to learn from it, and to make changes based on what one learns. In one sense all programs are "prototypes." We put them together, evaluate them, teach them and revise them. But there is an assumption about conventionally developed programs, that once they are approved they continue until there is some traumatic reason to end them. A prototyping environment has the working assumption, from the start, that the effectiveness of "the product" is not taken for granted, and should never be taken for granted.

What's wrong with the current collegial review process?

A curriculum incubator is only one way to encourage new ideas. What is perhaps crucial to it is that it invites ideas

from all levels of the university—junior faculty, senior faculty, those heading programs and those not. The test is always the merit of the idea, not the voice presenting it or the authority from which that voice springs.

Neil Kleinman has been an academic dean and faculty member at a number of colleges and universities, where he has used the principles of the "curriculum incubator" to start graduate and undergraduate programs. Currently he is professor of communication and media and managing senior fellow at the Corzo Center for the Creative Economy at the University of the Arts, where he established a "creative incubator" to support lean start-ups proposed by artists and media makers. He has written on a variety of subjects - law, literature, writing, technology, propaganda, the digital economy and medieval economies, and the influence of technologies on society. He has a JD from the University of Pennsylvania and a PhD from the University of Connecticut.