

## Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education

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Volume 48

Article 14

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September 2015

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### Recommended Citation

Groves, Robert and Bass, Randy (2015) "The Red House at Georgetown: Creating a Sustainable Future for Transformational Education," *Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education*: Vol. 48, Article 14.

Available at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/conversations/vol48/iss1/14>

# The Red House at Georgetown



# *Creating a Sustainable Future for Transformational Education*

**By Robert Groves  
and Randy Bass**

## ***Institutional Design***

**I**n fall 2013, Georgetown launched an initiative called “Designing the Future(s) of the University” as a strategic institutional response to the widespread and noisy national conversation about the nature and value of traditional university education. Is college worth it? Will the university be disrupted by massive online education and the burgeoning web-based options for learning skills and content? What is the longterm value proposition of a residential education that aspires to prepare students for a life of professional success, personal flourishing, and make a difference in the world?

We launched the Designing the Future(s) of the University Initiative to address these questions not only through dialogue engaging the whole community but also through active experimentation that could help us begin to address the questions about what a Georgetown education could look like 5, 10, and 15 years into the future.

In April 2014, we released a document called “Five Pump-priming Ideas,” in which we invited the community to imagine the Georgetown education of the future. What might a Georgetown education look like if it were less course-based, less term-based? We invited faculty to think beyond the standard 15-week semester and the three-credit course – or even beyond the credit hour altogether. What if we thought outside the nine-month calendar? Or beyond the boundaries of the classroom and the campus? How might we better bridge curriculum and cocurriculum in order to center undergraduate education on the most transformative experiences? All of these questions are in the context of the most important driving design question: What is distinctive to the kind of education that Georgetown can offer in a world with so many options for learning content, acquiring skills, and finding information? And, finally, how can we do so while controlling the unsustainable rising costs of higher education?

Within a few months of releasing the document, after dozens of hours of conversation with interested faculty and staff, we had identified our first small group of projects that were ready to undergo a design process. The site for this incubator activity was a small red town-

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house just across the street from campus, a place that has come to be known as “the Red House.”

The Red House plays a crucial mediating role as one of the three key components necessary to make this kind of institutional design and transformation possible:

- An institutional invitation to think creatively outside the current structural constraints (“top-down”);
- Faculty-generated ideas for experiments that explore new kinds of courses and degrees (“bottom-up,” grass roots);
- An agile design space process that connects creative development with problem-solving around implementation by key stakeholders (the Red House).

The Red House plays multiple key roles in advancing the Designing the Future(s) work. First, it provides a safe creative space for faculty and staff to spin out new ideas that have the potential to deepen student learning and improve the teaching experience of faculty. Each of these ideas has the potential to reinvent the university’s model. That is, ideas have to be more than just enhancements to the curriculum. They must push against and reimagine one or more formal boundaries of the way we make the curriculum work.

This is, then, the second critical role that the Red House plays. As an arm of the provost office, and led by the vice provost for education and the director of academic affairs, it is a creative space with convening power. That is, as the design process unfolds, the Red House brings together faculty creative teams with the process stakeholders (registrar, deans’ offices, financial aid, state authorization) to help shape radical ideas into achievable experiments – without losing their essential boundary-pushing character. By late spring 2015, nearly 20 curricular projects were being incubated through the Red House, all in different stages of development. The first of these have already gone to faculty governance groups and curriculum committees for approval.

## ***A Sustainable Transformational Education***

There is a distinct feeling of urgency in the Red House that the next 2-3 years are crucial in shaping the Georgetown of the next 20 and beyond. We believe that in 5-10 years, all universities – especially private ones – will be out-competed on costs and convenience for anything that looks like the delivery of information and simple content. We also believe that it is likely that market norms will push for a shorter time to a residential degree as the options expand for doing what looks like a “first year” or “introductory courses” online and elsewhere.

Other models will also keep pressing in on us, including competency-based education and the rise of microcredentials and alternative degrees.

In this emerging context, we believe that there are really only two kinds of education that a university like Georgetown will be able to offer, say, by the middle of the 2020s that will be distinctive from what students will be able to get on the Web. We might call these two kinds of education mentored learning and the arc of learning. By mentored learning, we don’t mean 1:1 mentoring but much more broadly to mean the kind of learning one gets thinking critically and working on unscripted problems in conditions of uncertainty, with people who know more than you guiding you. By the arc of learning, we mean that education is a whole journey greater than the sum of its parts. In this journey, place and community matter, as does the idea that you are engaged in work on complex problems with a diversity of individuals, many of whom might be people you would never have worked with so closely.

**E**very Red House project is designing some new version of educational experience that maximizes our ability to offer a sustainable version of an education that centers on the kind of learning that universities will be able to do distinctively into the future: reimagining credit-bearing experiences to enable more students to do sustained project-based work across semesters; breaking down boundaries – through credit, cost, and load – to make it possible for more courses to move inside and outside the classroom and between theory and practice; reimagining how courses and course modules could be linked and combined in order to give students earlier and substantive engagement with interdisciplinary approaches to complex global problems.

Of course, all of these kinds of learning are potentially expensive and resource-intensive parts of our model. Therefore, we must take them up in the context of creative rethinking of the core elements of the business model, such as one-size-fits-all course structures, variable credit and modular course design, separating credits from seat time, finding new ways to mark progress-to-degree tied to outcomes rather than courses, and new ways to count faculty load and measure what we might call “instructional productivity.”

This combination to enhance the formational learning we most value with a drive to break open the constraints of our business model has led to set of first-wave pilots. Here are five of the most promising ideas that are moving toward implementation in academic year 2015-16:

- Project-based degrees: developed first as a set of project-based minors where some or most of the credits

for a minor are awarded for projects and achievement rather than through courses, these experiments help pose whether some portion of every degree's credits should be based outside the classroom through experiences with integrative practice.

- Post-course studios: several pilots underway are testing ways to expand guided learning outside the classroom, where students who become interested in a project in a course can continue that work in a credit-bearing context. These are not independent studies but studios where teams of students continue learning through authentic projects, typically with external partners.
- Signature semesters: we are seeking to completely reimagine the first and last semesters of the college degree. How could the first semester on campus be an entirely different integrative experience, plunging students not into a set of courses but into collaborative projects on complex problems, mixing critical thought with skills-based learning, often in local community-based settings? How could the final semester be reimaged as truly integrative of the entire education and a better launching pad for entering a globalized world?
- Four-year integrated bachelor/master's: is it possible to give students both a bachelor's and a master's degree for the same four years of tuition? By next year, we intend to launch the first of these interdisciplinary degrees, where the learning goals and pathways to degrees have been completely reinvented to create degrees with a focus on outcomes, variable pathways, and a 12-month curriculum that makes different use of summers, practica, and short intensive course modules.
- Experience wrapped by credit-bearing online learning: in summer 2015, we are launching the first of our experiments with wrapping online learning around immersive experience. The pilot, "Social Justice Intersections," enables students who are engaged in social justice immersion experiences all over the globe to take part in a variable credit online experience, giving them a reflective space, a community and a series of one-credit skills modules aligned with their summer experiential learning.

## ***Toward a More Integrated University***

When we launched the Designing the Future(s) Initiative, President John J. DeGioia delivered the inaugural talk, in which he argued that universities were distinctive in their engagement in three interrelated kinds of activities.

- The formation of men and women, prepared to contribute as informed and inquisitive global citizens.
- The creation of knowledge through scholarship and knowledge inquiry, by providing a place for faculty and students alike to come to a deeper understanding of our world and its complexities.
- Serving the common good, aligning our work as a university community with local, national, and global needs and supporting the betterment of humanity.

President DeGioia's argument is that universities engage in these three activities in ways that are deeply interrelated. Universities are the only institutions where formation is done in the company of people who are spending their lives inquiring into the world's most important questions. And universities are one of the only institutions in our society that engage in research for the common good. And, in turn, the fact that universities create knowledge and serve the common good has everything to do with the ways that we provide a context for the formation of young people.

The purpose of the Designing the Future(s) Initiative, and the Red House, is to see this moment not as one of disruption but of opportunity, the opportunity for us to be a yet more integrated university that optimizes for formation, knowledge-creation, and serving the common good.

For us to be able to afford to be that university into the future, we need not only to be driven by a sense of values, a sense of mentored learning, and a belief that education is a whole greater than the sum of the parts, we have to imagine new ways to integrate all of our pieces affordably. We have to figure out how students will spend less time in classrooms and more time out being mentored in the field. We have to imagine how we can link curriculum and cocurriculum together, in the context of big, global issues and challenges. We have to imagine how we can help students move much more purposefully through their education. We have to connect better the impact we have on students with the impact the university seeks to have on the world. These are the things we're after in the Red House at Georgetown. ■

For more information about the Designing the Future(s) Initiative see, <http://futures.georgetown.edu>.

For a brief WGBH-FM / NPR story on the Red House see the On Campus series: <http://blogs.wgbh.org/on-campus/2014/12/23/georgetown-explores-whether-it-can-reinvent-itself/georgetown-explores-whether-it-can-reinvent-itself/>.