

# Society for College and University Planning SCUP Fellow Research Project Final Report

## Designing and Developing Mature, Mission-Aligned Online Academic Programs at Jesuit Institutions

Royce Robertson, PhD  
SCUP Fellow 2020–2021



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#### ABOUT THE SOCIETY FOR COLLEGE AND UNIVERSITY PLANNING (SCUP)

At SCUP, we believe that by uniting higher education leaders, we can meet the rapid pace of change and competition, advancing each institution as it shapes and defines its future. Through connection, learning, and expanded conversation, we help create integrated planning solutions that will unleash the promise and potential of higher education.

Our community includes colleges and universities (two-year, four-year, liberal arts, doctoral-granting research institutions, public, private, for-profit, and private sector). Individuals we serve include planning leaders with institution-wide responsibilities, such as presidents, provosts, and other senior roles, to those who are in the trenches, such as chairs, directors, and managers.

#### WHAT IS INTEGRATED PLANNING?

Integrated planning is a sustainable approach to planning that builds relationships, aligns the organization, and emphasizes preparedness for change.



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### MEET ROYCE ROBERTSON

I am the director of instructional design and academic technology at Le Moyne College, where I also teach research to occupational therapy graduate students. As an academic technologist, I work to implement technology solutions related to curriculum, instruction, and assessment. While I have had many titles in my career, I am always happiest professionally when I am working at the intersection of technology, assessment, and teaching and learning. As part of my dissertation on institutional support systems necessary for faculty to create electronic teaching portfolios for promotion and tenure, I started to align my professional and leadership perspectives with maturity models and the concept of maturation. I received my EdD in curriculum and instruction from Argosy University - Sarasota. Since then, I have published and presented broadly in the areas of assessment system maturity and various academic applications of maturity models. When I learned about the SCUP Fellows Program, I was immediately attracted to the prospect of applying maturity models to my role at Le Moyne College, a Jesuit institution in Syracuse, New York.

## WHAT PROMPTED YOUR CHOICE OF RESEARCH TOPIC?

It was June 2014 and I was three months into my new position at Le Moyne College. This was my first experience teaching at a religiously-affiliated institution. One of my earliest discussions was with one of the Jesuits, who asked me, “Royce, what makes an online course Jesuit?” My initial response was, “The design. You have to plan for how the student will engage in the Jesuit tradition.” Frankly, it was a wildly impromptu response; however, it ignited a curiosity in me regarding how to actually make a course “Jesuit” in a fashion that could be consistent with our mission from module to module, course to course and program to program. I still wasn’t sure how, but I did know that maturing the design and development process at the institution was the ideal strategic direction. Fast forward almost six years and one declined SCUP fellow application in 2019. I used the feedback to improve the next submission which was approved.

## THE PROJECT

The purpose of this study was to observe maturation of the design and development of mission-aligned online academic courses and programs at Jesuit institutions. Jesuit institutions, although unique in mission, struggle with structural barriers to implementing successful online academic programs:

- Using online programs to meet a wide range of institutional needs that include access, curricular gaps, demand, revenue, etc. (Bacow, Bowen, Guthrie, Lack & Long 2012; Crosslin, Benham, Dellinger, Patterson, Semingson, Spann, Usman, Watkins 2018; King & Alperstein 2018)
- Navigating issues such as external competition for enrollment, faculty commitment, internal culture toward online education, program quality, the role of online education, varying fee structures, accreditation, etc. (Bacow et al. 2012; Crosslin et al. 2018; King & Alperstein 2018)
- Developing online programs to meet student demand, fill enrollment gaps, and explore new markets (Bacow et al. 2012; Crosslin et al. 2018; King & Alperstein 2018)
- Acknowledging an obligation to the student to provide curriculum and instruction that achieves the ideals of the specified institutional mission. That may include access, civic responsibility, diversity, liberal arts, personal development, or service (Morphew & Hartley 2006). In the case of Jesuit institutions, their missions are brought to life using concepts such as *Cura Personalis* (care for the whole person), *Magis* (the More, excellence), and “men and women for and with others” (spirit of collaboration for a common good).

Applying practices of planning and maturity would improve the design and development processes that lead to the fulfillment of the mission in online academic programs at Jesuit institutions of higher education. In general, maturity models have two purposes: formalize and optimize (Hammer 2007; Humphrey 1987, 1989). Formalization entails four phases: Plan, Build, Implement, and Evaluate. There are five levels of optimization: Initial, Repeatable, Defined, Capable, and Efficient (Hammer 2007; Humphrey 1987, 1989).

## HOW DID YOU APPROACH AND CARRY OUT YOUR RESEARCH PROJECT?

The project was guided by two exploratory questions: What does a mature, mission-aligned online program development process look like at Jesuit institutions of higher education? What are common planning practices used in mature, mission-aligned online program development at Jesuit institutions of higher education?

The purpose of the process was to observe process maturity associated with the design and development of mission-aligned online academic programs at Jesuit institutions in the United States. Twenty of the twenty-seven American Jesuit institutions participated. The project focused on the perspective of those positions at each institution that were most responsible for implementing the process used to design and develop online courses and programs. The data collection for the project was achieved by creating a custom survey to measure the process maturity involved in planning, implementing, and evaluating the design and development. The research design had three parts: mission analysis, survey data collection, and semi-structured interviews. The mission analysis resulted in identifying three themes and keywords that were then integrated into the custom survey. As mentioned, twenty institutional representatives responded to the survey, but only three agreed to be interviewed. There were a few key takeaways from the survey results; however, while the interviews produced great individual sound bites, there was very little generalizable information to share from the interviews.

## FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

While I was discouraged that I did not hear from all 27 Jesuit schools, I was very satisfied with the pool of respondents. Of the respondents, no job title was lower than director, with the most frequent title listed being director. Two-thirds of the titled individuals reported to an academic affairs unit (provost and/or vice president) with the remaining reporting to academic departments (dean and/or chair) or information technology (director and/or chief information officer). The population also exhibited a significant amount of institutional knowledge: Three-quarters of respondents indicated that they had six or more years at their existing institution, and one-half of those indicated that they had 10 or more years of experience. That fulfilled the intent of the study to include the opinions of those persons most responsible for the design and development of online courses at each

institution. As a result of the data collection and analysis, the following findings emerged:

- After collecting, parsing, coding (Spradley, 1979; Saldana, 2013), and analyzing the mission statements of all 27 American Jesuit institutions, three key non-Jesuit terms and phrases were apparent: community; diversity, equity, and inclusion; and social justice. The use of community reflected three key descriptors: the academic community, the campus community, and the surrounding community. The category of diversity, equity, and inclusion revealed sub-categories such as diversity of students, diversity of faculty, and respect for divergent thinking or ideas. The categorical use of social justice focused most on the empowerment of others through the power of education as well as advocacy for the margins and the marginalized. To deepen data collection and analysis, the categorical themes of community; diversity, equity, and inclusion; and social justice were then integrated into the survey that was used in the next phase.
- When considering the integration of mission into course design, there was a consistent, predictable decline across all three phases: Planning, Implementation, and Evaluation. The table below summarizes the results for each section of the survey, including the associated maturity level. The data indicated that the Planning phase was considered Defined, which reflected that planning actions were generally known, written down, and implemented with fidelity. The data also indicated that the Implementation phase was considered Managed, showing that the process of the course design was known and written down yet may not have been implemented consistently. The data indicated that the Evaluation phase was considered Initial, which revealed that processes may not have been written down and could be performed in different ways every time with little consistency or oversight.

#### Mean and Change of Design Phases

Phase	Mean (Maturity Level)	Change
Planning	3.29 (Defined)	
Implementation	2.37 (Managed)	-0.92
Evaluation	1.27 (Initial)	-1.10
Overall	2.31 (Managed)	-1.08

- The Planning phase is rooted strongly in the principles and mechanics of instructional design. Considering all of the survey items, the three highest mean scores for the Planning phase were: identify the roles, expectations, and requirements of the course design and development process (3.63 out of 5); adhere to a phased, intentional process for designing and developing online courses (3.53); and engage in faculty development to learn the basics of instructional design (3.32). Those results reflected a common practice at many institutions where administration identifies a course and program design and development process, often relying on faculty to act as subject matter expert, designer, and developer. There has been increased emphasis on following the process as a condition of being able to teach online. The participants generally indicated that while teaching with the mission in mind was important, it was not a requirement. Neither was any type of training on mission-aligned teaching required.
- The Implementation phase focused primarily on mission-aligned elements that were not explicitly Jesuit. Of the 12 items in the Implementation phase of the survey results, the three highest mean scores were associated with reflection (2.95 out of 5); social justice (2.89); and diversity, equity, and inclusion (2.74). Reflection was explicitly identified as part of the Ignatian Pedagogical Paradigm. The results indicated a notion that faculty members, who were predominately laypeople and not prepared as Jesuits, may have avoided designing, developing, and implementing instruction and assessment strategies that bring to life the Jesuit elements; they may have found doing so to be difficult or not of value. In either case, the practice of not teaching to the mission impedes the institution's ability to achieve its mission.
- The Evaluation phase also focused primarily on mission-aligned elements that were not explicitly Jesuit. Of the 12 items in the Implementation phase of the survey, the three highest mean scores were associated with building community (1.95 out of 5); diversity, equity, and inclusion (1.74); and reflection (1.78). Reflection was explicitly identified as part of the Ignatian Pedagogical Paradigm. The results revealed another common practice at many institutions where evaluation is an afterthought: relying mostly on what has been taught and de-emphasizing what has not been taught. Consider that both Implementing and Evaluating have similar means: They underscore the notion that reflection and diversity, equity, and inclusion are

visible and viable. However, given that the institutions and their missions are distinctly Jesuit, there should be more emphasis placed on designing, developing, implementing, and evaluating explicitly Jesuit instruction and assessment strategies in online courses.

- Given the overwhelming academic continuity response to COVID-19, I was concerned that participants would not be able to differentiate the frenetic response to the pandemic and the intentional design and development of online courses. Of the 20 respondents to the survey, 85 percent of institutional representatives agreed or strongly agreed that they were able to separate COVID-19 remote teaching pandemic response from intentional course and program design and development processes. Not only did this reduce my fears, it is also an indirect measure of process maturity.

#### TRANSFERABLE LESSONS & INSIGHTS FROM THIS RESEARCH PROJECT FOR OTHER COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

Regardless of the institution, it is important to consider the following takeaways as you start to plan “how do we bring our mission to life in our online courses.”

1. Parse out the language of the institution’s mission, then map (or align) where and how those mission parts are included in the instructional design process.
2. When evaluating the process of instructional design, make sure to ask about the breadth and depth of planning, implementation, and evaluation. Evaluation is often an afterthought.
3. Assess each mission part according to how well it is planned, implemented, and evaluated.

Some advice for leaders in all corners of the academic enterprise:

- Embrace maturity models as a means of observing improvement in course design and development. The results of the project revealed that evaluation of the process to design and develop mission-aligned courses and programs appeared to be an afterthought at many institutions, and there was little evidence that colleges and universities possessed proof that their missions were being achieved through the online courses and programs. At a time of financial and consumer reckoning in higher education, it has never been more

important for an institution to articulate how its mission is accomplished and to what degree. Leaders should be asking, To what degree are we achieving our mission through our online courses?

- Online education should not be perceived as a distraction of the mission—rather, an enhancement of it. Developing distinctiveness within the higher education online market is in fact an effort to encourage students to buy-in to the mission. For example, if your institution aims to meet students “where they are” (what the Jesuits call *Cura Personalis*), then marginalized learners should benefit from your institution’s online education. And the courses need to be designed and developed based on the context of those learners who are living on the margins. Leaders should be asking, Which students can benefit most from our mission-focused approach to online learning?
- Stimulate the creation of mission-aligned assessment and instructional strategies and evaluation of mission-aligned instructional design initiatives. Creating mission-aligned assessment and instructional strategies may assist with closing the gap between the Planning and Implementing phases. Establishing a repertoire of assessment and instructional strategies may provide all faculty with important guidance and examples on how to “bring the mission to life in the classroom.” For example, there is a daily structured, reflective practice among the Jesuits that is referred to as an examen. It often occurs in silence and has a predictable set of prompts that direct the prayer. For online students, this may result in the creation of a virtual examen, an audio or video artifact used to prompt reflection and introspection. The virtual examen would be aligned with the objective for that given learning experience (e.g., business ethics). Likewise, by purposefully designing mission-aligned assessment and instructional strategies, it may make evaluation more accessible, feasible, and useful. Leaders should be asking, What instructional and assessment strategies are we cultivating in our online courses, and how do we know that they are effective?
- Look for involvement and effort at every level of the institution. Boards of trustees should prioritize mission alignment in their strategic planning and budget-allocation processes. Academic leadership should establish expectations and provide incentives for faculty to engage in mission-aligned course design, development, and evaluation, including assessment

and instructional strategies. Faculty governance bodies need to thoughtfully revise online course design and development checklists and rubrics (e.g., Quality Matters, etc.) to include mission-aligned assessment and instructional strategies. Likewise, course and program evaluation committees and workflows should describe the ideal evaluation process for determining the degree to which faculty and course designers are bringing the mission to life in the online classroom. Overall, designing more mission-aligned online courses will demonstrate and illuminate the mission within the online classroom itself, increasing the chances that the student sees the mission come to life online and experiences the distinctiveness of the institution. Leaders should be asking, Who can get engaged in this process, and how can they be involved in our success?

## LAST WORDS

An underlying assumption of this research is that if colleges and universities have online offerings, there should be an obligation to align them to the mission of the institution through an intentional instructional design and development process. If the mission is fundamental to the uniqueness of the institution and the education it offers, then online offerings need to be even more attentive to the unique instructional aims of said mission. At a time of financial and consumer reckoning in higher education, it has never been more important for an institution to articulate how its mission is accomplished and to what degree.

While this project was implemented among Jesuit institutions, it should not be perceived as solely concerned with religious education. There are some components that can be related to many other institutions in American higher education. The initial inclusion of Jesuit institutions allows for establishing general guidelines and practices within a specific context. These later can be applied to other faith-based institutions (900-plus nationally); vocational and technical institutions (100-plus nationally); institutions with missions specialized by gender, race, and disability (250-plus nationally); and any institution with a mission (5,300-plus nationally) (United States Department of Education 2021).

### HOW DID YOUR SCUP COACHES SUPPORT YOU IN YOUR PROJECT?

Three insightful, supportive, and inspiring leaders were my SCUP coaches for my SCUP Fellow Research Project. Pamme Boutselis, Senior Content Director at Southern New Hampshire University (SNHU), was forward-thinking, and provided great feedback on every aspect of the project. I enjoyed our conversations about the alignment of mission with every aspect of the institution. Dr. Antoinette Farmer-Thompson, Deputy Vice President of Educational Outreach and Student Services at Arizona State University, provided substantial and generative feedback on the project and took it a big step further by challenging me to think about the impact of this work on the trajectory of my career. And, Katherine Lehman-Meyer, Visiting Professor of Communication at Saint Mary's University in Texas, provided great feedback on the relationship between the mission, the implementation of the project, and how the results could be applied to other institutions. She provided even more insight from the perspective of an administrator-faculty member who has been responsible for mission-aligned instructional design and development.

I am incredibly grateful to all three coaches for their expertise, leadership, support and generosity. I look forward to the day when I can meet each of them in person and thank them for their role in the success of this project.

## ROYCE'S SCUP COACHES



**Pamme Boutselis** serves as a senior content director, writer, and adjunct communication faculty at Southern New Hampshire University (SNHU), a private, nonprofit, accredited institution serving more than 150,000 learners globally. SNHU expands access to education by creating high-quality, affordable, and innovative pathways to meet the unique needs of each and every learner. With more than 25 years of diverse marketing and communication experience throughout corporate and nonprofit sectors, Pamme focuses on SEO and brand content as part of SNHU's award-winning creative team. SNHU's mission is integral to her nearly decade of work at the university.



**Antoinette Farmer-Thompson, EdD**, is an executive leader with unique capabilities and proven outcomes resulting from 17 years in corporate America followed by 12 years of progressive experience in higher education. Positions have included senior vice president of institutional effectiveness, Honors College dean, and diversity officer at Grand Canyon University. Most recently, Toni spent three years as deputy vice president of Educational Outreach & Student Services, leading finance/budgeting, marketing, technology, and career services at Arizona State University. Effective November 1, 2021, she will be provost/chief academic officer of Strayer University, which serves 43,000 students.



**Kathe Lehman-Meyer** is a visiting professor of Communication Studies at St. Mary's University in San Antonio, Texas. Using her background in instructional design/technology running the Academic Media Center for 18 years, and her 16 years of professional experience in broadcast, corporate communications, and brand management/marketing, Kathe is able to integrate real experience into online learning and curriculum development. She is integrally involved in leveraging the Marianist Catholic values throughout campus activities and in the classroom.

*SCUP fellow coaches are volunteers who are experienced in an area of higher education or thought leadership that is aligned with the ultimate goals of the SCUP Fellow Research Project. They bring fresh perspectives and insights over the course of the fellowship year. We thank Royce Robertson's three SCUP coaches for their generosity of time and perspective.*

#### HOW DID THE SCUP FELLOWS EXPERIENCE IMPACT YOU PERSONALLY?

Beyond the nature of the project, my curiosity for the topic, the excellent coaches, and the wonderful support from the SCUP staff, I felt the most impact from my 'fellow Fellows' - Shannon Dowling, Senior Associate at Ayers Saint Gross; and Erin Johnson, Interim Director of Strategic Initiatives at Rutgers University. Shannon and Erin are the gifts that I did not expect to receive as part of the SCUP Fellows Program process. Both Shannon and Erin are hard-working experts in their respective fields, and they are guided by an internal compass that tells them to do right and do good for the students that we all serve in higher education. I wish that I could have spent more time with them talking, planning, brainstorming, and hearing their ideas on how to improve higher education.

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