

Instructional Design Consultation Process



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Introduction

We operate Blueprint Learning Studio, a learning and design consultation company that partners with institutions of higher education across the country. Our recent partnership with Monmouth College, a small, private liberal arts college in New England, has yielded numerous individual inquiries from faculty seeking learning and design support across a wide range of disciplines and challenges. In this studio report, we overview our approach to the consultation process and review how this applies to our work at Monmouth while incorporating best practices, actionable outcomes, and future-oriented preventative planning.



The Blueprint Learning Studio Consultation Process

At Blueprint Learning Studio, we approach instructional challenges through a four-part consultation process that moves from understanding a concern to building sustainable change. This process keeps our work collaborative and grounded in established learning design practices, ensuring that accessibility, engagement, and alignment are treated as connected elements rather than separate issues.

The next page outlines this four-step consultation process. The sections that follow demonstrate how it guides our approach to accessibility and inclusive course design.



OUR CONSULTATION PROCESS

STEP 1.



Start by listening: Every engagement begins with conversation and review. We clarify what the faculty member is noticing, look at course materials together, and try to understand what may be contributing to the concern. Instead of assuming the problem is technical or student-driven, we consider structural, instructional, and contextual factors. This step builds shared understanding and sets expectations for partnership.

STEP 2.



Make the invisible visible: After listening, we move into analysis. This might include alignment mapping, population analysis, or an accessibility audit. The goal is to surface patterns that may not be immediately obvious. By pairing faculty insight with established frameworks, we create a clearer picture of where adjustments would make the most meaningful difference.

In some cases, this analysis reveals misalignment between objectives and assessments. In others, it surfaces inconsistencies in module structure that increase cognitive load. Sometimes the issue is not engagement itself, but unclear expectations. By making these patterns visible, faculty can make targeted adjustments rather than broad revisions.

STEP 3.



Design solutions together: With that clarity, we co-develop practical improvements. We focus on sequencing changes in a way that is manageable and sustainable. The goal is not to overhaul everything at once, but to make thoughtful revisions that strengthen the course while respecting faculty workload and institutional realities.

STEP 4.



Build for the future: Finally, we look beyond the immediate issue. We embed checkpoints, templates, and review practices into future course development so the same problems are less likely to resurface. This preventative focus reflects principles of instructional systems design, which emphasize structured analysis and iterative improvement (Hodell, 2021).



Support Area: Accessibility and Inclusive Design

Dr. Nguyen reaches out after receiving feedback from a student who struggled to navigate her online course. The academic content is strong, but some readings are scanned PDFs, videos lack captions, and weekly modules vary in structure. She cares deeply about her students and wants the course to be inclusive, but she is unsure where to begin and concerned about the time required for revision.

This situation is common. Accessibility gaps rarely stem from indifference. More often, they emerge from inherited materials, shifting technologies, or uncertainty about which changes will have the greatest impact. Our role is to help turn that uncertainty into a clear and manageable plan.

Research on inclusive course design consistently emphasizes that accessibility is most effective when approached proactively rather than reactively. Universal Design for Learning encourages anticipating learner variability during the planning phase rather than responding only after barriers emerge (CAST, 2018; Meyer et al., 2014). At the same time, instructional systems design highlights the importance of structured analysis before implementing solutions (Hodell, 2021). Together, these perspectives reinforce that accessibility is not a technical afterthought, but a design consideration that should be embedded throughout the course development process.

This informs how we move through each stage of the consultation process.



SUPPORT AREA: ACCESSIBILITY AND INCLUSIVE DESIGN

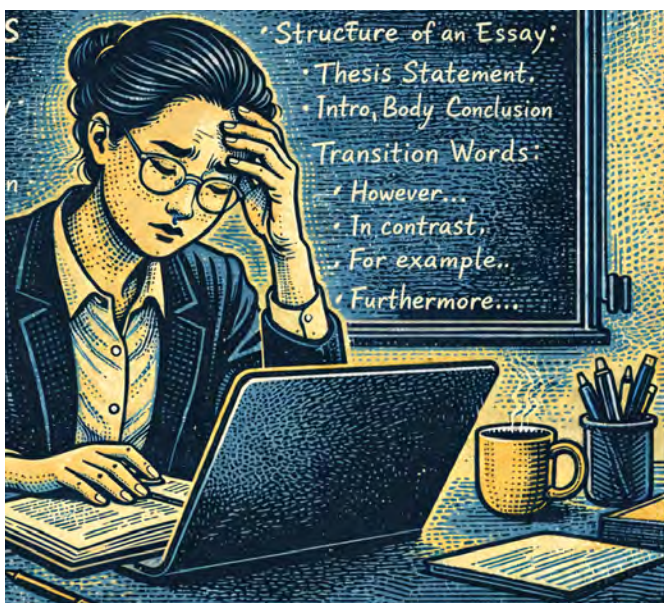
1. START BY LISTENING

We begin by reviewing the course materials with Dr. Nguyen and clarifying where barriers may exist. Accessibility is not limited to visible disabilities. Barriers can affect students with sensory impairments, neurodivergent processing differences, temporary injuries, inconsistent internet access, or caregiving responsibilities.

Recognizing learner variability as normal rather than exceptional shifts the conversation away from accommodation and toward inclusive design.

Online environments can amplify small barriers. A missing caption, inconsistent navigation, or unclear heading structure may seem minor in isolation, but together they can significantly increase cognitive effort. When design decisions assume that all students will engage with content in the same way, friction increases. Anticipating different access needs from the beginning reduces that friction and helps students focus on learning rather than figuring out how to navigate the course.

This approach aligns with Universal Design for Learning, which encourages anticipating variability during planning rather than responding after obstacles arise (CAST, 2018; Meyer et al., 2014). It also reflects systems-oriented instructional design practices that emphasize careful analysis before intervention (Hodell, 2021).



SUPPORT AREA: ACCESSIBILITY AND INCLUSIVE DESIGN

2. MAKE THE INVISIBLE VISIBLE

Next, we conduct an accessibility audit aligned with Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (World Wide Web Consortium, 2018). We examine heading structure, alternative text, captioning, document formatting and tagging, navigation consistency, and color contrast.

Accessibility is not only about technical compliance. It also shapes how learning experiences are structured. Universal Design for Learning emphasizes providing multiple means of representation, engagement, and expression (CAST, 2018). In practice, this might include offering transcripts

alongside videos, providing structured outlines, or offering flexibility in how students demonstrate their understanding when the format itself is not the learning objective.

We also examine alignment. When assessments rely on a single format, objectives may technically align but remain inaccessible to some learners. Inclusive design strengthens alignment by ensuring that students can access content and demonstrate learning in more than one way.

This analysis is not simply a compliance exercise. It provides insight into how Dr. Nguyen's design decisions shape student cognitive load, navigation, and participation. Inconsistent module layouts, unclear instructions, or rigid assessment formats can unintentionally create confusion that affects persistence and engagement. By examining these patterns systematically, we help Dr. Nguyen distinguish between concerns about student motivation and structural design barriers.



3. DESIGN SOLUTIONS TOGETHER

After identifying priorities, we work with Dr. Nguyen to determine which revisions will have the greatest impact within a realistic timeframe. Rather than recommending a comprehensive redesign, we prioritize changes in a way that is manageable and sustainable.

Based on our analysis, initial recommendations are prioritized for both impact and feasibility.

These may include:

- Converting high-use readings into accessible, searchable formats with proper heading structure and tagging.
- Captioning core instructional videos and providing downloadable transcripts.
- Adding alternative text to images and improving color contrast where needed.
- Standardizing weekly module layouts to create predictable navigation patterns.
- Revising assignment instructions for clarity and consistent formatting.

- Providing flexibility in how students demonstrate understanding when format is not central to the learning objective.
- Developing reusable templates for future lectures, discussions, and assessments.

Throughout this process, Dr. Nguyen remains an active decision-maker. We provide templates, formatting guides, and short training resources so that inclusive practices can be integrated into future content development with confidence.

Faculty often find that clearer structure and multiple content formats not only improve accessibility but also reduce student confusion overall.



SUPPORT AREA: ACCESSIBILITY AND INCLUSIVE DESIGN

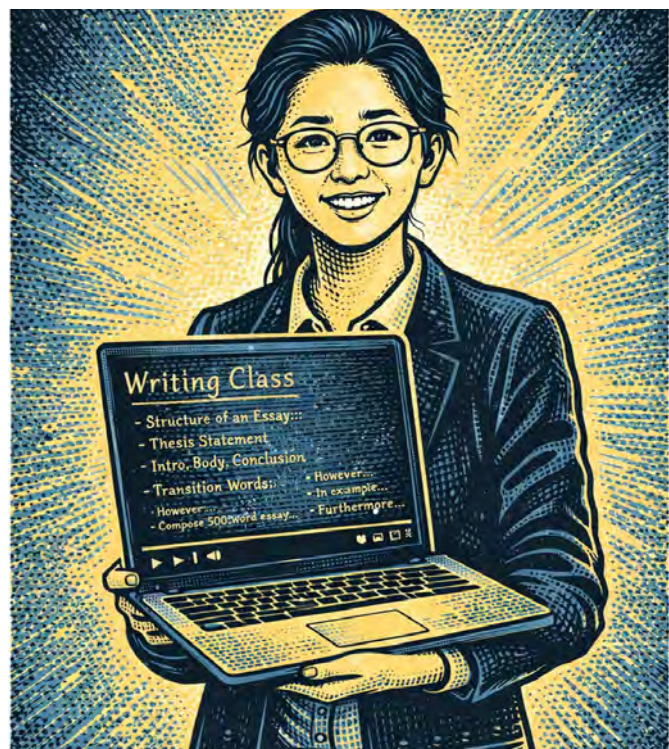
4. BUILD FOR THE FUTURE

Accessibility is most effective when embedded early in the design process rather than addressed at the end. Preventative strategies might include incorporating accessibility checkpoints into course blueprint reviews, discussing UDL principles during objective development, and conducting pre-launch accessibility scans.

In practice, this can look like building a brief accessibility review into syllabus planning, mapping alignment while objectives are still being drafted, or completing a short usability walkthrough before course launch. Templates may provide structured heading hierarchies, consistent module layouts, or guidance for captioning and document formatting. These shifts reduce the need for reactive fixes and help faculty develop more sustainable design habits over time.

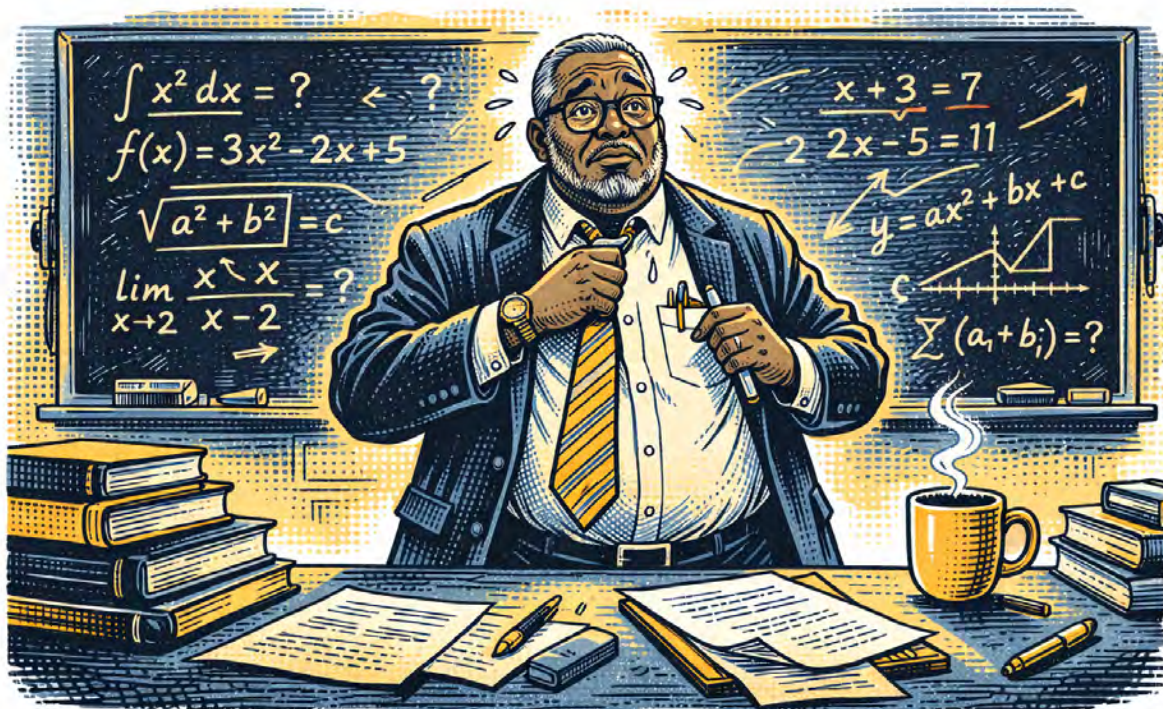
Instructional systems design emphasizes structured evaluation and iterative refinement (Hodell, 2021).

When accessibility is integrated into early planning conversations, revisions become cumulative rather than reactive, creating a feedback loop that strengthens design over time. When supported through ongoing refinement (Hodell, 2021; CAST, 2018), inclusive design becomes part of overall instructional quality rather than a separate initiative.



Support Area: Collaboratively Addressing Instructional Challenges

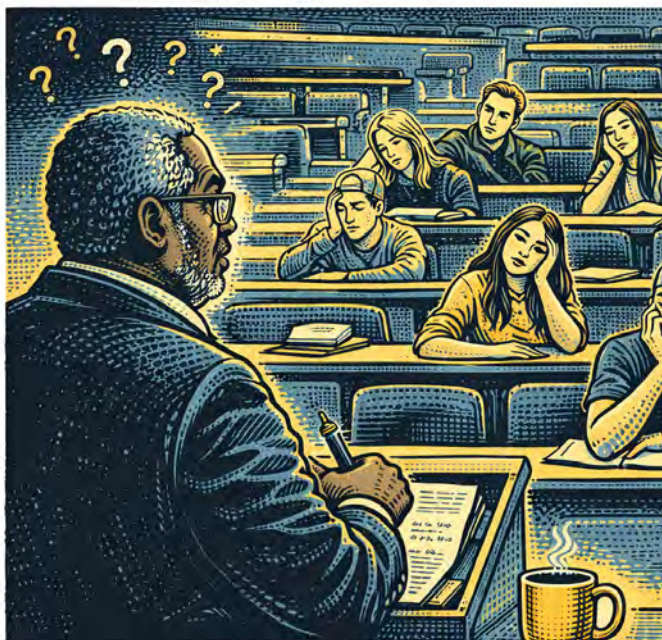
Two weeks ago, our studio received an email from Professor Baggins. Baggins has been a math professor at the university for fifteen years. He summarized the support he seeks from our team with the statement: “My students seem disengaged, and I’m struggling to identify the root causes. I’m not sure how to work with others to clarify the learning journey or boost motivation in meaningful ways.” As someone who truly cares about his students, Baggins takes the feedback and observations seriously and is seeking to adjust how he approaches the course. We’re eager to work with Professor Baggins through each phase of our design process.



SUPPORT AREA: COLLABORATIVELY ADDRESSING INSTRUCTIONAL CHALLENGES

1. START BY LISTENING

To lay a strong foundation of our support for Professor Baggins, we meet with him to learn more about the challenges he is encountering. During our conference, he elaborates on the trends he's noticed in student engagement. Following the COVID-19 pandemic, survey ratings began to decline for his Calculus 1 course. At the end of last semester, they reached an all-time low. He hoped it was an anomaly, and entered this semester optimistic—and realistically, he didn't have much time to revamp the course.



A few weeks into the semester, and he is noticing behaviors that are causing him concern: student disengagement during class, which leads to minimal homework completion and high absence rates.

This context prompts us to refocus on Professor Baggins's initial problem statement, which has three core components that we will support him to examine: student disengagement and low motivation, the struggle to identify the root cause, and the desire to work with others to clarify the learning journey. After a review of best practices related to these three areas, we'll discuss how these can apply to Professor Baggins's particular setting, and show how these recommendations align with the studio's philosophy and long-term applications to prevent similar pitfalls in the future.



2. MAKE THE INVISIBLE VISIBLE 1 of 3

In analyzing the first aspect of the statement, the student disengagement and low motivation, we applaud Baggins's attentiveness. Amidst the many burdens of the faculty workload, Baggins shows his continued care and dedication to his craft by paying attention to feedback surveys, rather than simply blaming students for not trying hard enough. This is the sign of a committed professor, and we were eager to partner with him.

Student disengagement and low motivation can stem from several causes. First and foremost, it is important to remember that college students are adult learners, and so we need to keep that context in mind. Adult learners may have competing responsibilities in their lives that can detract from their ability to focus on learning—this might include outside obligations for family or work or financial constraints, among others (Tuset, 2022). In terms of internal

factors, experts in the field emphasize the need for adults to know the “why, what, and how” of the learning they are facing (Hodell, 2021). Chuck Hodell (2021) goes on to further illustrate that “adults must feel like they are the reason the learning is taking place in order to become intrinsically motivated” (Chapter 3).

The concept of motivation is complex. A deep dive into the neuroscience of motivation is beyond the scope of our design studio. However, for the purposes of our support for Professor Baggins, it's important to remember that motivation moderates learning (Wlodkowski, 2008), and so increasing and fostering student motivation can increase student engagement and thereby enhance learning outcomes. This is easy to recommend, though, and harder to implement due to the complex nature of motivation.



SUPPORT AREA: COLLABORATIVELY ADDRESSING INSTRUCTIONAL CHALLENGES

2. MAKE THE INVISIBLE VISIBLE 2 of 3

After a review of literature from the field, we are listing several of the most common best practices below:

- Given the time constraints and competing responsibilities that adult learners experience, make all learning experiences intentional and relevant to the learning outcome (Hodell, 2021).
- Positive emotions related to learning give the learning experience “preferential processing in the brain” (Wlodkowski, 2008, p. 18). Thus, eliciting positive emotions can help make learning more memorable, thereby enhancing motivation (Wolfe, 2008).
- Similarly, providing regular, frequent feedback can enhance motivation by activating brain-based reward centers (Wlodkowski, 2008).

It would be irresponsible, however, to apply best practices without first understanding the root cause. Professor Baggins is already keenly aware of this given the statement he presented to our team. To provide an overview of best practices in this area, we return to one of the most recognized learning design

models: ADDIE. Broken down, the ADDIE cycle reviews the process of completing a design sequence. Beginning with an analysis of the population and challenge, the creator then designs the learning experience, develops materials, implements those materials, and finally evaluates the outcomes (Hodell, 2021).

Professor Baggins’s query strikes at the foundation of the design process: the Analysis phase. The analysis is essential for understanding the current gap between course materials and student engagement. Though types of analysis vary widely, a common approach that may be relevant to the current setting is a population analysis (Hodell, 2021), where Professor Baggins gathers information about the current demographics of the students in his class, including age and prior knowledge. Given the previous discussion of motivation, it would be especially relevant to gather information about student motivations for enrolling in this particular course.



2. MAKE THE INVISIBLE VISIBLE 3 of 3

Specific recommendations for how to implement a population analysis are provided in the following subsection.

Finally, Professor Baggins highlighted a desire to collaborate with others to clarify the learning journey. Though not explicitly stated in his initial email, Baggins's desire to collaborate resonates with research that emphasizes the benefits of collaboration. Studies show that faculty and staff collaboration can have a positive impact on student engagement (Syno et al., 2023), can improve trust among participants (Pischetola, Møller, & Malmborg, 2023), and has a positive impact on teacher well-being and self-efficacy (Arkansas State University, 2025).

There are numerous opportunities for collaboration around a problem statement in similar settings. In any instructional design setting, individuals like Professor Baggins should begin by identifying potential stakeholders he can collaborate with. In the university context, it can be helpful to identify if an instructional design team is available, as these partnerships can be integral for supporting course development (Richardson et al., 2018). Other stakeholders might include fellow faculty who are teaching the same course, the department chair, and even students themselves. Once stakeholders are identified, best practices include identifying an effective project management tool and managing communication effectively (Evanick, 2023). Specific recommendations will be explored in the next section.



SUPPORT AREA: COLLABORATIVELY ADDRESSING INSTRUCTIONAL CHALLENGES

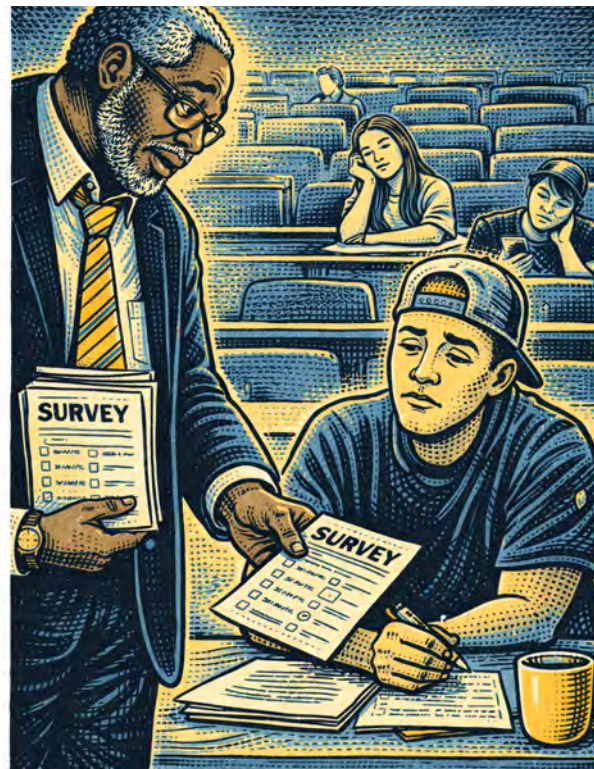
3. DESIGN SOLUTIONS TOGETHER

1 of 2

Once again, we applaud Professor Baggins's commitment to his students and his desire to grow his teaching in a way that increases their motivation for learning. Our studio makes three initial recommendations for how to tackle these challenges, drawing on the research and best practices reviewed in the previous section:

- **Identify and pursue partner stakeholders.** Since our team offers a design studio, we highly recommend utilizing the support of our learning design team with regularly scheduled meetings. We would also recommend that Professor Baggins seek the partnership of another math professor on campus and establish a regular, bi-weekly schedule of meetings with them for further insights and accountability.
- **Revisit the first step of the design cycle (analysis) and perform a population analysis.** For a pivot mid-semester, we would recommend distributing a short survey to the members of the class. To get as much feedback as possible, Professor

Baggins could incentivize completion by tying it to a grade in the course, or performing a raffle for a small prize for those who complete it within a certain timeframe. Questions should relate to student reasons for enrolling in the course, barriers to course engagement and motivation, and preferred solutions.

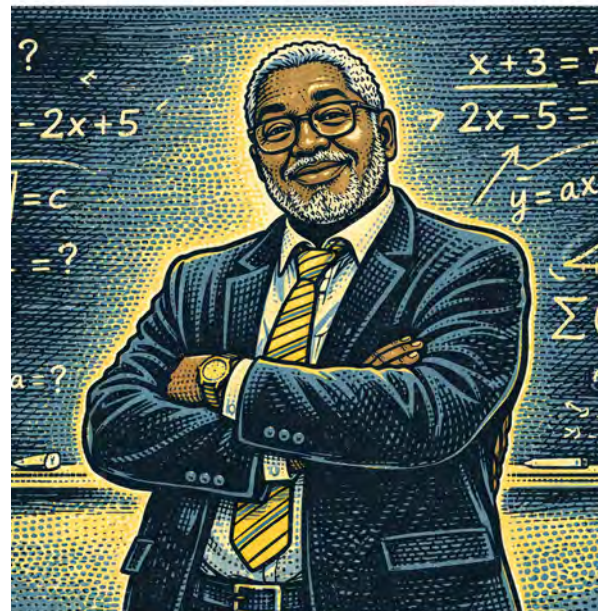


SUPPORT AREA: COLLABORATIVELY ADDRESSING INSTRUCTIONAL CHALLENGES

3. DESIGN SOLUTIONS TOGETHER

2 of 2

- **Through collaboration with stakeholders, implement one to two small changes each month to address barriers to student engagement.** Baggins should utilize the instructional design studio for support in designing and implementing these adjustments. Collaborating with a fellow math faculty, who would also be considered a subject-matter expert (SME) can assist him in brainstorming small changes to make. These changes may include, but are not limited to:
 - Redesigning course projects that connect to real-world situations relevant to students' majors and lives. This adjustment assumes that a barrier to motivation is the relevance of Calculus to the students' chosen major. Following the process described above can increase investment in the course, and clarify the "why" for students.
 - Create opportunities for formative feedback for students during the course. These can be through in-class polling, or short surveys at the end of each class. This aligns with the idea that frequent, regular feedback can strengthen relationships and increase motivation.



SUPPORT AREA: COLLABORATIVELY ADDRESSING INSTRUCTIONAL CHALLENGES

4. BUILD FOR THE FUTURE

While the above recommendations are intended to provide immediate support in the current semester, our studio would recommend that Professor Baggins continue to partner with us, as well as build long-term relationships with additional stakeholders to address these growing concerns in the long term. Specifically, Professor Baggins might benefit from raising these concerns with his department chair. If he is able to show an increase in student engagement and outcomes based on his interventions, the results may compel the department chair to more widely assess student motivations in similar entry-level courses across the department, and potentially the school.

It would be beneficial and advisable to conduct a broader population analysis of the challenges that are preventing engagement in introductory courses. While we identified potential causes related broadly to adult learners above, it would also be prudent to assess challenges that particularly relate to

college students in the current post-COVID-19 world. For example, rising mental health challenges are cited as a common barrier for student learning in universities across the United States (University of Michigan School of Public Health, 2025). Following a thorough population analysis and assessing trends across different introductory courses, faculty can return to the ADDIE model and update courses accordingly.

Additional opportunities for collaboration across departments and faculty can also provide avenues for sustained growth. By increasing communication opportunities across departments through small, interdisciplinary working groups, faculty should be especially intentional about the Evaluation phase of ADDIE in order to prevent a repeat of this experience. Faculty should continually assess student motivations for the courses they enroll in, and work together to make these courses meaningful outside of the particular discipline, which aligns with the liberal arts mission of the school.



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