

Fitting Flexibility Across the Curriculum

Peirce College

Cathy M. Littlefield & Stephanie Donovan

The processes and experiences described in this chapter took place at an associate, bachelor's, and master's degree-granting, private, not-for-profit, non-residential, Mid-Atlantic urban institution. Student demographics are as follows: 80% identify as students of color, 70% are female, 61% is equal to or over the age of 30, 65% identify as first-generation college students, 85% receive Financial Aid, and 67% are Pell Grant Eligible.

As an institution steeped in a long, rich history as a pioneer of serving the adult learner, innovation has always run deep in the organizational culture. Most recently, in response to declining retention, enrollment, and credit hours, an innovative course delivery option was piloted in Spring 2014. In this new model, now called Peirce Fit®, students choose, every week, whether to participate online or on-campus within a single course. Online participation is registered when students submit a gradable assessment during a given week of class, for example, contribute to a threaded discussion or complete an online quiz. On campus participation is registered when a student attends class on campus.

Before Peirce Fit®, classes were offered exclusively online or on-campus for the entirety of the course. Courses at this institution are delivered in a 7-week accelerated format, which requires both online and on-campus learners to complete course work asynchronously. Following the pilot study, the College decided to implement the Peirce Fit® model across the institution, beginning with courses in the Graduate Division and Health Programs division in Fall 2016. Enthusiasm for this model, in part, focused on removing the lack of in-person attendance as a barrier to student retention in a single course. In this chapter, we will discuss the institutional needs for modifying the traditional delivery model, the goals of the new model, the implementation challenges faced, and the impact of the new model on students, faculty, and the delivery of instruction.

Rationale—Why Now?

Developing and deploying innovative, flexible, academic instructional models supports the need to respond to a changing higher education landscape. Innovation and institutional efficiency are and always have been priorities at the [Peirce College](#). During challenging times, the college frequently turns to innovative delivery methods as a way of meeting the students where they are and providing opportunities for learning that are student-centric, fresh, and unique. In the early 1990s, the College was on the forefront of the online learning paradigm, and in 2014, turned to innovation again as a way to bridge the gap between course offerings, and declining retention and persistence concerns, while creating sustainable enrollment.

Four years before the pilot, the College introduced three new undergraduate health programs to its existing curriculum. Even though enrollment in these programs grew, the on campus and online

sections were relatively small as a result of giving students an option for delivery mode. The College saw this as an opportunity to explore the efficacy of offering exclusive online or on-campus instruction. In the new model, students are provided the flexibility to decide every week how they will attend; fully online or on campus. During the transition to the new model, preserving on-campus delivery remained an important aspect. Research (Malone, 2014) confirmed adult learners appreciate flexibility, as such, by design we maintained a face-to-face component. Offering flexibility rather than directing students to a singular learning modality was the most appealing option for meeting the collective needs of the students and the College. The design approach was organized and intentional, with the conscious plan to provide flexibility students desire, as well as continuous enrollment and degree completion.

Roadmap for Implementation

A steering committee was convened and charged by the Vice President Academic Advancement to guide and document the pilot in the academic year 2014-15 and develop a recommendation for a new hybrid delivery model. Initially organized into two workgroups, the steering committee was comprised of the department program chairs, the dean of academic operations, the instructional design specialist, and the student learning assessment specialist. Specifically, the workgroups were charged with:

1. Articulating a working definition of Peirce Fit® for the pilot;
2. Evaluating courses piloted in the Peirce Fit® model and determining which elements of the pilot should remain as recommendations in the final report;
3. Undertaking an environmental scan and exploring how higher education institutions were using hybrid course delivery models;
4. Establishing a quality assurance plan for Peirce Fit® courses;
5. Exploring course load implications for Peirce Fit® faculty and the College;
6. Exploring faculty development implications for faculty teaching Peirce Fit® courses;
7. Exploring financial aid implications for students enrolled in Peirce Fit® courses;
8. Assessing financial implications to the College for offering Peirce Fit® courses/model (include budget projections);
9. Submitting a final report and recommendations to the College's Executive Leadership Team

The Peirce Fit® model was conceived of and piloted before the College's knowledge of Beatty's HyFlex model (EDUCAUSE, 2010). While attending the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) conference in November 2014, a faculty member learned about the HyFlex model. Upon her return from the conference, she shared the discovery of HyFlex with members of the College's executive leadership team responsible for managing the pilot and its subsequent college-wide implementation. Discovery of the Hylex model during the pilot phase was key to advancing the work of the steering committee and the early adopters. Specifically, we looked to the HyFlex principles of learner choice, equivalency, reusability, and accessibility to guide how we set about transforming on campus only and online only courses to Peirce Fit® courses. The principle of equivalency informed how faculty set expectations for both groups of students within a single course. Early versions of Peirce Fit® included a weekly table denoting the course learning outcomes for a given week and the assessment(s) for online and on-campus learners.

As the pilot was underway, the President and Executive Leadership Team identified Peirce Fit® as a strategic initiative, and the pilot status was removed. Consequently, the steering committee was

restructured and a new sub-team was tasked with undertaking the financial analysis of Peirce Fit®, to include the development of an across-the-institution implementation timeline, financial analysis, required resources, identification of operational challenges, and marketing opportunities. In Fall 2014, a presentation was made at a faculty meeting designed to discuss the driving forces for change, including managing canceled classes, enrollment, retention, persistence, attendance, and the need for students to maximize financial aid in relation to timely degree completion.

The College began implementing the Peirce Fit® model in Spring-Summer, 2014-2015, with the conversion of Health Programs courses and Graduate Studies courses. Faculty received one course release time to undertake this work. Additionally, a faculty development program was created to facilitate the conversion and implementation process. In fiscal year 15-16, the Peirce Fit® model was implemented in six additional degree programs, including Accounting, Business Administration, Human Resource Management, Integrated Leadership, Information Technology, and Technology Management. In fiscal year 16-17, the College completed its conversion of courses to the Peirce Fit® model with the remaining programs in Paralegal Studies, Legal Studies in Business, Criminal Justice Studies and General Studies.

Implementation Process

The design of the Peirce Fit® model, originally termed FLEX, originated from the work of the implementation team, which was comprised of four subteams; Marketing & Communications, Instruction, Faculty & Student Support, and Assessment. The Instruction subteam was charged with:

1. Determining course shell management (masters - one for FLEX and one for online?);
2. Determining threaded discussion opportunities for different uses;
3. Demonstrating technologies that could support the FLEX delivery; (Adobe Connect, Google Hangout, Camtasia Relay, YouTube, ApprenNet)
4. Developing pedagogy best practices for the FLEX environment (Ex; flipped classroom);
5. Establishing minimum design criteria for FLEX courses (how are FLEX courses different); (Early Adopters)
6. Implementing a plan for strengthening the student and instructor experience in a FLEX course; (chart, lesson plans, learning activities)
7. Articulating faculty expectations for teaching FLEX; (FAQ)
8. Implementing classroom management and student management strategies in a FLEX environment (Ex; student no shows); (FAQ, lesson plan)
9. Determining the course schedule for FLEX and online-only offerings;
10. Authoring and securing approval of "Note to Instructor" language
11. Documenting how one would FLEX a course
12. Developing an expedited QA process and rubric
13. Developing an attendance policy
14. Developing FAQs for students and faculty

While the process was fully planned, documented, and executed, the Peirce Fit® model is, in fact, a living instructional model and institutional initiative. As an institution, all divisions are engaged in the iterations that move the model forward with a focus is on continually striving to strengthen and improve instruction and opportunities for students.

Challenges

The implementation of Peirce Fit® across the College was not without challenge, and we continue to refine aspects of the model as part of our ongoing learning and refinement. The brevity of the pilot phase created a sense of curiosity among the faculty as to the rationale for implementing the Peirce Fit® model. Viewed as an opportunity to engage faculty, two focus group sessions were held to garner feedback and perspectives. In 2016, focus groups were held on campus for the full-time faculty and online for the adjunct faculty. The focus groups consisted of nine probing questions related to the understanding of Peirce Fit®, perceptions, likes, challenges, classroom management strategies, perceived student perceptions, and needed support. The following themes and frequency emerged from the transcripts:

Table 1

Focus Group Themes

Theme	Number of Coding References	Number of Words Coded	% of total
Impact on Teaching & Learning	70	2,944	45%
Faculty Workload	32	1,306	20%
Attendance	13	634	10%
Flexibility	12	566	9%
Faculty Understanding of Peirce Fit®	14	524	8%
Technology	12	330	5%
Adjunct Faculty	7	180	3%
Total	160	6,484	100%

Additionally, several sub-themes were identified:

Table 2

Focus Group Sub-Themes

Theme	Sub-Theme	Sub-Theme
Impact on Teaching & Learning	Student expectations	Lesson planning, classroom experience
Faculty Workload	More work - teaching twice	Low on-campus attendance can make instruction difficult / time intensive

Attendance	Offers students a plan to avoid absenteeism	Planning for small on-campus attendance
Flexibility	Student choice is important for adult learners	Students not changing from week-to-week & lack of understanding of what Peirce Fit® is
Faculty Understanding of Peirce Fit®	Desire for students to attend at least the first class on campus	Lack of consistency in how Peirce Fit® is applied to instruction
Technology	More robust technology for instruction (lecture capture and synchronous delivery)	Students using cell phones for assignments
Adjunct Faculty	Balancing the requirements of Peirce Fit®	1-hour wait time & concern for recruitment

The consolidated data were presented to the VPAA, and the following recommendations were adopted:

1. Strengthen professional development for faculty focused on instruction, teaching, and learning
2. Evaluate faculty workload
3. Ensure consistent messaging across institution related to Peirce Fit®
4. Adopt and implement new and more robust instructional technology tools
5. Survey faculty for areas in which support is needed
6. Evaluate foundational courses that should not be offered in Peirce Fit®

Impact of the Plan

The approach was deemed successful. With a clearly articulated plan, the Peirce Fit® model was implemented in an accelerated fashion as a means to address an institutional need. As such, a quick victory was identified when data revealed a decrease in absenteeism. However, the approach which included gaining longitudinal faculty perceptions identified area of opportunity, to include the previously identified themes. For other academic institutions who aspire to innovate, it is critical to have a strong project management plan and to engage key stakeholders along the way. Success will be more likely with a cross-institutional team; a high level of coordination, and fully engaged collaboration. A testament to the success of this plan was the willingness of the faculty to be engaged and willing partners in this process, and to continually strive for the flexibility Peirce Fit® affords our students.

Conclusion

The changing higher education landscape and inherent challenges lead to faculty experimentation with an innovative hybrid delivery model that would significantly alter how instruction is delivered at this College. For students, the model would provide flexibility in how they attended each class within a course, and for the College, the model pointed toward real opportunities to improve operational

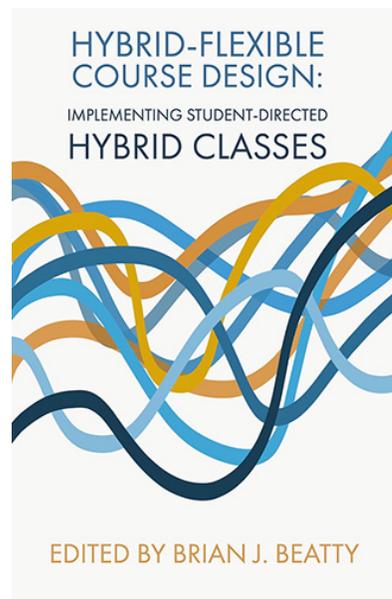
efficiency. Following a pilot study, this College decided to implement the Peirce Fit® model with hopes to address challenges currently being faced.

Under the leadership of the Vice President, Academic Advancement, faculty continue to experiment, refine, and improve the Peirce Fit® model as part of the academic and curriculum planning process. In Fall 2017, the College implemented a new learning management system (LMS) called Canvas. Canvas offers more robust learning technologies than the previous LMS used at the College. In many ways, access to this new technology aligns with the Peirce Fit® model and has been a positive experience for both students and faculty in the Peirce Fit® environment. However, learning is ongoing and mastering the Peirce Fit® model has proven to be an iterative process, and each academic year, the model is improved.

References

EDUCAUSE. (2010, Nov). 7 things you should know about...the HyFlex course model. *EDUCAUSE Learning Initiative*.

Malone, S. (2014). Characteristics of adult learners. *Training & Development*. 41(6).



Littlefield, C. M. & Donovan, S. (2019). Fitting Flexibility Across the Curriculum: Peirce College. In B. J. Beatty (Ed.), *Hybrid-Flexible Course Design*. EdTech Books.
https://edtechbooks.org/hyflex/fitting_flexibility



CC BY: This work is released under a CC BY license, which

means that you are free to do with it as you please as long as you properly attribute it.