Can a University Transform Itself This Fast?

At Old Dominion, a move to accelerate courses has divided the campus.
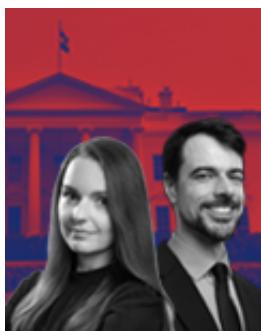

THE CHRONICLE

CURRICULAR CONCERNS

By *Beth McMurtrie*

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L ike a lot of universities, Old Dominion has faced, and adapted to, significant enrollment challenges. The number of on-campus students at the public research university, located in coastal Norfolk, Va., has dropped by nearly a third over the past decade. A growth in online-only students has shored up enrollments, but the overall student body has shrunk by nearly 10 percent.

So faculty members, many of whom are accustomed to teaching in both formats and serving a wide variety of students, including working adults, took it in stride when in 2023 the president, Brian O. Hemphill, unveiled a goal of nearly doubling the number of fully online students, to about 12,000, as part of a five-year strategic plan. The plan included offering shorter semesters to cater to the needs of specific groups, such as members of the military.

But faculty members balked when the provost, Brian K. Payne, announced more

details last August: All online courses, at both the undergraduate and master's levels, would shift to an eight-week asynchronous model. That would require hundreds of courses to be redesigned in time for the fall of 2026.

Since then, faculty leaders have forcefully criticized senior administrators for failing to consult the Faculty Senate and Faculty Forum, which includes all full-time faculty members, before making this major — and some say misguided — decision. They question why a significant curricular change would be executed so quickly, without time to consider whether the format is best for specific courses, programs, or students.

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The administration has pushed back with equal force, stating that the university faces existential threats that, if not managed, could lead to program closures and budget cuts. It argues that this and other decisions were built on years of strategic planning involving many faculty members.

Perhaps the most contentious defense senior leaders have made is that the change was an operational decision, not a curricular one. Faculty members, they have said in dozens of meetings across campus, will continue to have full control over what and how they teach, just as long as the courses are done in the eight-week, asynchronous format. Many faculty members say teaching in this new format will, by definition, rob them of full control.

NEWSLETTERS

The dispute at ODU may be unusual in how public the disagreements have become. The Faculty Senate passed a [resolution](#) in September asking the administration to put the plan on pause, and in January it released a [faculty survey](#) expressing widespread concerns about the planned changes. The campus chapter of the American Association of University Professors enlisted the support of the national organization, which sent a [letter](#) to the administration in January stating that faculty members have primary responsibility for curriculum, method of instruction, and the technological infrastructure of a course.

But the issues at play are not unique. Colleges nationwide are responding to pressures coming from all directions, including rapid changes in teaching and learning technologies, a decline in traditional-age college students, and losses of federal funding under the Trump administration. Higher education wasn't built for speed, however, and shared-governance structures demand a slower pace of change. When threats loom, who decides how much faculty consultation is sufficient?

The university has been offering distance-education courses and programs for more than 40 years and has long supported working adults, including the roughly 30 percent of students, both on campus and online, who work in the military. Many professors critical of the rapid conversion say they think asynchronous courses are appropriate in certain circumstances and that they are always looking for innovative ways to engage

students.

What they are concerned about is the decision to reduce online offerings to a single model, and to do so quickly. About 70 percent of respondents to the faculty survey opposed the mandate. More than 75 percent said they thought the move would worsen student learning. And more than 80 percent wanted to see the transition delayed until the university receives more input from faculty members. (The administration questioned the response rate, suggesting that it represents a small fraction of all instructors. But the study's authors said 503 respondents identified themselves as faculty members, which represents about 40 percent of all faculty members.)

"Faculty are having to make very serious decisions about what content they can offer and what content has to be cut in order to fit it into that format," says Corrin Gillis Allen, chair of the Faculty Senate and an associate professor in the School of Speech-Language Pathology. "You can't just take 16 weeks and jam it into eight and call it a day. The load on students would be completely unmanageable."

Making online classes asynchronous also raises a host of complex pedagogical questions: How do you hold a discussion when students aren't in the same virtual room together? What happens if a student gets stuck on a concept? Office hours and synchronous online sessions can be added, administrators noted, but not mandated.

The administration has offered a raft of support. It hired an outside company, Six Red Marbles, to help faculty members restructure their courses and employed more than 36 full-time professionals to support the effort, including instructional designers, media specialists, and accessibility experts. Faculty members were given stipends for course redesign. In December, the provost

announced that instructors could receive course releases as needed. The university has also offered workshops and training for instructors on asynchronous-course design.

Some faculty members who have attended these sessions, though, say the advice they get is fairly general — as it must be, they note, when you're trying to apply design principles to a range of courses and disciplines. Others say the reality on the ground is more confusing than the administration presents, with faculty members getting inconsistent messages from deans and department chairs about how much control they have over the redesign process.

"They have an idea of what they want, but it seems pretty clear they don't really have any idea of how to operationalize it and are expecting the faculty to figure it out," says Michael Carhart, a history professor and president of the campus AAUP chapter.

Payne, the provost, says the administration has been working with faculty members who might be dealing with particularly challenging scenarios. Some graduate courses that require practicums, for example, have been allowed to be broken into two eight-week sessions rather than compressed into a shorter timeframe. "They're not going to be 900 courses that look exactly alike," he says. "There's plenty of room for faculty to select the pedagogical strategies that they're going to use."

But each decision comes with its own set of consequences. Allen notes that the speech-language-pathology program requires "hardcore clinical preparation." So when her department decided to go from online classes to in person, rather than choose compressed asynchronous ones, that meant second-year students, who are all off campus doing clinical work, would spend less time in the field.

Adminstrators point to evidence that students may learn better in an accelerated format. Old Dominion already offers 22 programs and certificates in the eight-week asynchronous model and reports that the rates of their students earning D's, F's, or withdrawals are 2.4 percent lower in asynchronous courses than in in-person ones, and 5 percent lower in eight-week asynchronous online courses than in 16-week in-person ones.

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Not all faculty members oppose the change; those who support it say the accelerated model could work better for their students. Vuka Jovanovic, a professor and chair of engineering technology, says most online students in engineering technology are working adults focused on degree completion. Synchronous online courses are difficult to fit into their busy lives. She isn't worried about the lack of real-time interaction, saying that students can always request Zoom meetings as needed.

Brett H. Cook-Snell, a senior lecturer in the Darden College of Education and Professional Studies, calls the transition to accelerated courses "a solid strategic move." Yes, revamping a course requires a lot of work, he says, but Old Dominion has "built a strong infrastructure to support this initiative."

Skeptics say that doesn't mean all students would do well in such an environment. It's entirely different, says Myles McNutt, an associate professor of communications, to teach one of his media courses in a fast-paced format —

which he has done — than it is, say, calculus or a foreign language, where concepts build on each other and struggling students can quickly fall behind. "There's just no way that every student will be able to adapt to doing work twice as fast," he says. They may want that compressed format, he says, but "generally, it is not what they need."

And what about students who want real-time interaction with professors and fellow students? "I feel like the consequences on the students we currently have," he says, "have simply not been considered enough."

Administrators say their data show the accelerated model is where demand lies. Nina Rodriguez Gonser, vice president for digital transformation and technology, says the university receives more than 55,000 inquiries a year about online courses, and one of the main reasons students do not enroll is because they want an eight-week option where there is none. She also says the online courses that fill up fastest are the accelerated asynchronous ones.

The need for a transformation aside, critics are especially frustrated at the pace of the change. They don't understand why the administration refuses to slow down the transition process.

Kate Hawkins, vice president for the campus AAUP chapter, says faculty members are now receiving conflicting directions from deans and department chairs about whether they can or can't alter any redesigns made by the outside vendor. Yet senior administrators have said repeatedly that faculty will retain full academic control of their courses at all times. "The whole thing just sounds like a hot mess," says Hawkins, a professor of communication and theater arts.

Hemphill, Old Dominion's president, says there is no turning back. Faculty members may not fully appreciate the headwinds ODU is facing "because we

have not eliminated academic programs. We've not cut faculty lines."

More fundamentally, he doesn't think it's wise to slow the pace of change because the market is changing so quickly. "We have to make sure that we're on the front side of that wave," he says, "because you know what happens if you're not."

Meanwhile, the march toward accelerated courses continues. The administration says more than 70 percent of online offerings for the fall of 2026 have been, or are on their way to being, redesigned.

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Beth McMurtrie is a senior writer for *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, where she focuses on the future of learning and technology's influence on teaching. In addition to her reported stories, she writes a weekly [Teaching](#) newsletter about what works in and around the classroom. You can sign up here to receive the Teaching newsletter in your inbox on Thursdays. It's free, and it helps us connect with our readers. Email her at beth.mcmurtrie@chronicle.com and follow her on [LinkedIn](#).