John Roebling, one of the world’s best-known civil engineers, understood the importance of making connections. A visionary, he saw Pittsburgh’s many rivers as a challenge to progress and built some of the city’s most essential bridges, including the Smithfield Street Bridge in 1845.

It was an incredible technical accomplishment. Building bridges requires a mix of design, engineering, planning and manufacturing that was unusual at that time. The ingenuity and especially teamwork between so many disciplines required Roebling to coordinate pieces that helped make Pittsburgh the “City of Bridges” it is today.

Like Roebling, Dr. Darlene Weaver also relies on mixing and matching disciplines and bringing disparate teams together. Her Smithfield Street Bridge? Revitalizing Duquesne’s general education curriculum to re-imagine the student experience and ensure 21st-century success, a pillar of the University’s 2018 strategic plan.

**BRIDGES FOR BIGGER GOALS**

Like building bridges, making changes to any university’s general education curriculum is not an easy task. It requires a bold vision that offers students the knowledge and skills they need, while balancing the disciplines required to reach those goals.

Determining this balance is often a contentious process among faculty at many universities. Weaver, Duquesne’s associate provost for academic affairs, took a different approach, eschewing the executive committees used by many institutions and well, leaving it up to the village.

“We wanted to create a greater sense of ownership in the curriculum among the entire campus community...”

“It Takes A Village to Build Bridges

DUQUESNE IMPLEMENTS AN INNOVATIVE APPROACH TO 21ST-CENTURY EDUCATION
Many may recognize the line from the hit song by American singer-songwriter Khalid. Did the tune factor into the title of a new Essential Questions seminar?

Just like the songwriter describes the parties clarifying their relationship to prevent them from "missing" their way, the seminar Can We Talk? helps students think about civil discourse, a key tenet of Duquesne’s culture, as they resolve their own conflicts.

At a time when social media can fan divisive flames, the phrase "Can we talk?" suggests empathy for the other person in the moment. As essential questions go, it’s vital, a question that can lead to positive outcomes, preparing Duquesne students not for careers but for the people they become.

It is not the only essential question new students are asking this fall. The Bridges Common Learning Experience was designed to include an array of courses that meet that curious impulse and the expectation students have for jumping into their learning right away.

The new Essential Questions stimulate curiosity and discussion in the seminars. Learning together, students in these seminars challenge themselves to go beyond the surface, look for a fuller story, ask hard questions and think about how new knowledge shapes their worlds. The ultimate goal of Bridges is to offer a foundation for post-graduation success by providing students with skills that are in demand among employers.

So the University created Design Day, a creative design competition where faculty, staff and students could draft course ideas, plan activities and determine learning outcomes. More than 200 members of the University community participated in the revision process. Once completed, Weaver and her team had dozens of ideas to consider as part of the redesign.

CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT MINDSET

"I was so pleased at how our University community banded together to be part of this effort. The process was remarkably collegial," said Duquesne University President Ken Gormley. "Design Day provided a lot of opportunity for new ideas. It also included everybody in the discussion. Now, we have integrated many of these great ideas into the new curriculum. It was a wonderful University-wide collaboration."

What came out of the design competition was the Bridges Common Learning Experience, which launched this fall. The name refers to Pittsburgh’s more than 400 bridges—appropriate, as the curriculum encourages students to think across disciplinary perspectives, connect ideas and reach beyond what’s familiar to them. The ultimate goal of Bridges is to offer a foundation for post-graduation success.

The new curriculum at a previous institution before joining Duquesne’s Spirtan Division where he helped students on the verge of their college careers improve their English. Interested in China’s economy, he then initiated an opportunity where he could study and teach English in Shanghai as part of his 2019 internship. “Duquesne gave me the confidence and knowledge to take the initiative and chart my own course,” Wolfe said. “It took me beyond the classroom to find experiences that met my interests and furthered my career goals.”

Many Duquesne alumni have been helpful in providing these hands-on experiences to students, Weaver said, and the University hopes to create more opportunities working with alumni in the future.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR CONNECTION AND IMPACT

Bridges includes an emphasis on a flexible curriculum that allows for more opportunities for experiential learning. The collaborative nature of the process also brought students into the discussion, allowing the University to address some of their concerns.

“Some students said that previous general education requirements were arbitrary,” Weaver said. “So we emphasized creating a clear rationale for courses so students would better understand how these classes expand their horizons while meeting their goals.”

“Students taking a social science or history class, for example, may gain a better understanding of the culture where they may be teaching, starting a business or designing a product by taking that course,” Weaver said.

NEW AND CLEARER VANTAGE POINT

“We placed an emphasis on highlighting the skills and competencies these courses can bring to help students as they pursue their careers,” Weaver said.

Bridges also focuses on creating more practical learning opportunities, which can move a student to a new and clearer vantage point, both in terms of what they are studying and the larger world.

“We are taking a more entrepreneurial approach when it comes to experiential learning,” said Duquesne University Provost David Dussey, who redesigned a general education curriculum at a previous institution before joining Duquesne. “Students want to learn by doing, whether that’s in a lab, through an internship, a study abroad program or working in the community. We want to make that happen for them.”

Recent Duquesne graduate Alex Wolfe, who received a prestigious U.S. Fulbright Award this year, exemplifies this approach. While studying economics, Wolfe worked as a tutor for Duquesne’s Spritan Division where he helped students on the verge of their college careers improve their English. Interested in China’s economy, he then initiated an opportunity where he could study and teach English in Shanghai as part of his 2019 internship.

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ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

In addition to experiential learning, Bridges is designed to challenge students in thought-provoking ways that nurture critical thinking, analysis and writing skills. Two signature features of Bridges are its Essential Questions seminars and Introduction to Ethical Reasoning course.

Essential Question seminars are smaller scale courses that are organized around an animating question, such as Are Dogs Our Best Friends?, which looks at the unique relationship between humans and dogs. (See sidebar for more examples of essential questions.) Introduction to Ethical Reasoning introduces students to the practice, offering a common framework which provides students a shared vocabulary and common foundation for ethics education.

Essential Questions seminars are designed to stimulate intellectual curiosity while acclimating students to learning habits, such as persistence, flexibility and openness, that will be critical to college and career success,” Weaver said. “We want our students to be prepared for anything, and these types of programs lay the foundation for that to happen.”