

Consistency Without Uniformity: A Practical Guide for Reducing Student Cognitive Load Through Program-Level Course Standardization

Sandy Nielsen, PhD, RN, CNE, sdknigh@ilstu.edu & Theresa Adelman-Mullally, PhD RN, CNE

Menonite College of Nursing, Illinois State University

Why This Matters

- Students often encounter unnecessary barriers when courses in a program have:
- Different due date conventions
- Inconsistent navigation structures
- Variable assignment instructions
- Different grading expectations
- Multiple communication approaches

While each course may have high quality on its own, an inconsistent program design increases cognitive load and reduces students' ability to focus on learning. "Idealists might envision change occurring organically... hierarchical organizations must plan for change" (Adelman-Mullally et al., 2023, p. 5).

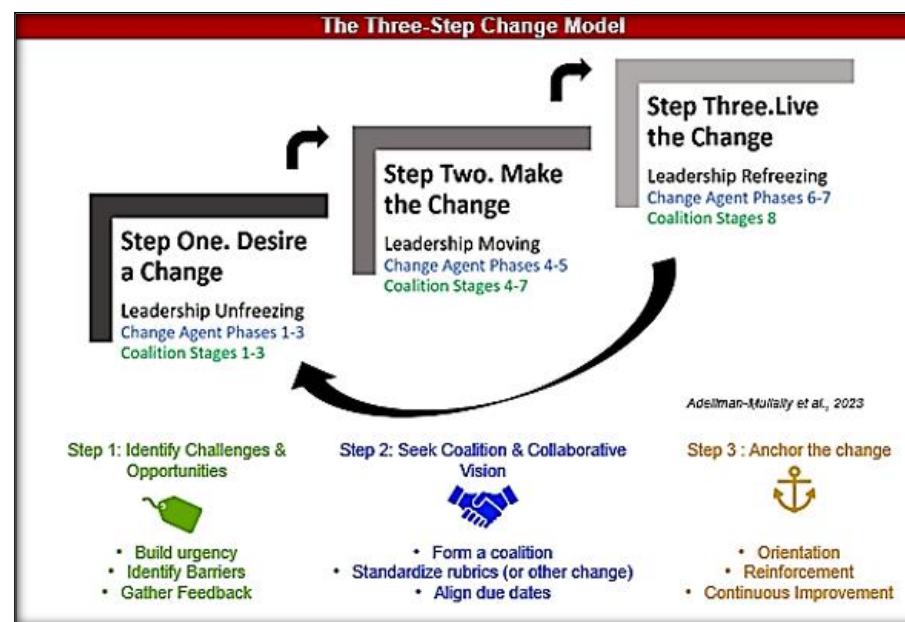
Goal: Create a predictable learning experience across courses while preserving faculty autonomy and disciplinary expertise.

Goal: Create a predictable learning experience across courses while preserving faculty autonomy and disciplinary expertise.																																		
Desire a Change Step 1	Make a Change Step 2	Live the change Step 3																																
Day 1-30 Identify Challenges & Opportunities	60-day Consensus Plan	90-day Anchoring Plan																																
Gather Data and Support • What are the most repeated students' complaints? • Where do students report confusion? • What practices are unnecessarily varied? • What are consistent faculty frustrations? • Identify barriers to change. Rate your program: From 1 (not consistent) to 5 (highly consistent) <table><tr><td>Area</td><td>Rating</td></tr><tr><td>Course Navigation</td><td>1 2 3 4 5</td></tr><tr><td>Assignment Instructions</td><td>1 2 3 4 5</td></tr><tr><td>Due Dates</td><td>1 2 3 4 5</td></tr><tr><td>Grading Practices</td><td>1 2 3 4 5</td></tr><tr><td>Faculty communication</td><td>1 2 3 4 5</td></tr><tr><td>Student Support Resources</td><td>1 2 3 4 5</td></tr><tr><td>Total Score</td><td></td></tr></table> Select: 1 area to change in the next 90 days	Area	Rating	Course Navigation	1 2 3 4 5	Assignment Instructions	1 2 3 4 5	Due Dates	1 2 3 4 5	Grading Practices	1 2 3 4 5	Faculty communication	1 2 3 4 5	Student Support Resources	1 2 3 4 5	Total Score		Use Data to support change Rate your Program Interpretation Guide • 24-30 Strong Culture of consistency • 18-23 Moderate consistency with improvement opportunities • Below 18 Program-wide standardization should be considered. Share findings and Collaborate 1. Schedule a faculty meeting to discuss findings. 2. Identify additional change agents and experts. 3. Develop Program-level agreements. Examples include: • Common course menu structure • Standard Syllabi • Consistent rubric format • Shared assignment expectations	Support Implementation Strategies • Faculty mentoring • Peer review • QM-informed course reviews • Student feedback analysis • Annual program evaluation Rate your program: From 1 (Not Consistent) to 5 (Highly Consistent) <table><tr><td>Area</td><td>Rating</td></tr><tr><td>Course Navigation</td><td>1 2 3 4 5</td></tr><tr><td>Assignment Instructions</td><td>1 2 3 4 5</td></tr><tr><td>Due Dates</td><td>1 2 3 4 5</td></tr><tr><td>Grading Practices</td><td>1 2 3 4 5</td></tr><tr><td>Faculty communication</td><td>1 2 3 4 5</td></tr><tr><td>Student Support Resources</td><td>1 2 3 4 5</td></tr><tr><td>Total Score</td><td></td></tr></table> Select the next area to change.	Area	Rating	Course Navigation	1 2 3 4 5	Assignment Instructions	1 2 3 4 5	Due Dates	1 2 3 4 5	Grading Practices	1 2 3 4 5	Faculty communication	1 2 3 4 5	Student Support Resources	1 2 3 4 5	Total Score	
Area	Rating																																	
Course Navigation	1 2 3 4 5																																	
Assignment Instructions	1 2 3 4 5																																	
Due Dates	1 2 3 4 5																																	
Grading Practices	1 2 3 4 5																																	
Faculty communication	1 2 3 4 5																																	
Student Support Resources	1 2 3 4 5																																	
Total Score																																		
Area	Rating																																	
Course Navigation	1 2 3 4 5																																	
Assignment Instructions	1 2 3 4 5																																	
Due Dates	1 2 3 4 5																																	
Grading Practices	1 2 3 4 5																																	
Faculty communication	1 2 3 4 5																																	
Student Support Resources	1 2 3 4 5																																	
Total Score																																		

Consistency is not about making courses identical. It is about removing unnecessary barriers so students can focus on learning.

Key QM Standards Supported

- ✓ Standard 1.1 Continuous Improvement
- ✓ Standard 1.2 Course Review
- ✓ Standard 3 Assessment & Measurement
- ✓ Standard 5 Learning Activities
- ✓ Standard 7 Learner Support



References

- Adelman-Mullally, T., Nielsen, S., Ford, C., Astroth, K., & Chung, S. Y. (2024, July-August). Lessons learned: Using a three-step model of planned change for nursing curricula revision. *Journal of Professional Nursing*. 53. 140-146. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.profnurs.2024.05.009>
- Adelman-Mullally, T., Nielsen, S., & Chung, S. Y. (2023, May-June). Planned change in modern hierarchical organizations: A three-step model. *Journal of Professional Nursing*. 46. 1-6. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.profnurs.2023.02.002>
- Kaylor, S. K. (2014). Preventing information overload: cognitive load theory as an instructional framework for teaching pharmacology. *The Journal of Nursing Education*, 53(2), 108–111. <https://doi.org/10.3928/01484834-20140122-03>
- Subramaniam, K., Kounios, J., Parrish, T. B., & Jung-Beeman, M. (2009). A brain mechanism for facilitation of insight by positive affect. *Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience*, 21(3), 415–432. <https://doi.org/10.1162/jocn.2009.21057>
- Sweller, J. (2011). Cognitive Load Theory. In *Psychology of Learning and Motivation*, Academic Press 55. 37-76. <https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-12-387691-1.00002-8>
- vanMerriënboer, J. J. G. & Sweller, J. (2005). Cognitive Load Theory and complex learning: Recent developments and future directions. *Educational Psychology Review* 17(2). 147-177. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10648-005-3951-0>