

Building a peace and conflict studies program under pressure: A practical guide to small program development

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Introduction

This chapter draws on more than twenty-five years in higher education as a student, faculty member, program director, department chair, and academic administrator. It reflects experience designing, revising, and leading peace and conflict studies curricula in varied institutional settings, from dedicated programs to those housed within larger academic units, where identity, visibility, and place within the institution were continually negotiated.

In recent years, peace and conflict studies programs have faced declining enrollment, pressure to demonstrate career relevance, limited resources, and, for many, the complexities of sitting within larger academic units. These pressures call for rethinking both curriculum and program strategy. Although this chapter draws primarily on U.S. higher education, many of these challenges are shared by programs worldwide. The strategies that follow offer practical guidance for designing and revising programs that remain intellectually coherent while responding to institutional realities.

Step 1: Determine Why Curriculum Revision Is Necessary

One of the most common mistakes curriculum committees make is to begin discussing courses before agreeing on why the curriculum is being revised. Faculty, administrators, students, and external stakeholders often arrive at the table with different concerns and expectations. Unless these differences are surfaced early, discussions about curriculum quickly become discussions about competing agendas.

Clarify the Purpose

Curriculum revision is rarely undertaken for a single reason. Faculty may wish to strengthen intellectual coherence or incorporate new developments in the field. Administrators may be concerned with enrollment, retention, or graduate outcomes. Students may seek more flexibility or clearer career pathways. Early conversations should focus less on proposed changes and more on identifying the primary purpose of the revision.

Questions such as these can help focus discussion:

1. What problem are we trying to solve?
2. What opportunities does this revision allow us to pursue?
3. Why is the curriculum being revised now?
4. Why did our attempt to revise the curriculum in prior years fail?
5. What would success look like three to five years after implementation?

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Recognize the Institutional Context

Every curriculum is shaped by the institution in which it exists. Before designing anything, program leaders should honestly assess the realities within which the program operates, such as:

- Enrollment patterns (declining enrollment),
- budget limitations,
- the program's location within the institution,
- faculty capacity,
- changing student demographics,
- competition from other programs, and
- university approval processes.

Ignoring these realities will produce proposals that cannot be implemented or sustained.

Consider Student Affordability

Curriculum discussions have traditionally focused on academic content, but the financial realities students face deserve equal attention. Affordability influences student enrollment, retention, and program completion. In some institutional contexts, curriculum revision may require reducing total credit hours, simplifying course sequences, or eliminating requirements that no longer contribute meaningfully to learning outcomes. Reducing credit requirements may be perceived by some as lowering academic standards. A rigorous curriculum has little value if students cannot realistically afford to complete it. Affordability should be treated as an educational consideration, not just a financial one.

Accept That Perfect Conditions Rarely Exist

Faculty often imagine curriculum revision as a thoughtful process that unfolds over many months and even years. Institutional approval calendars, accreditation requirements, and enrollment pressures frequently compress that timeline. Program leaders should be prepared to make sound decisions without waiting for complete agreement on every issue. A coherent, sustainable curriculum that can be refined over time is preferable to delaying necessary change in pursuit of a perfect solution. Curriculum revision is an iterative process. The goal is not perfection; it is progress.

Step 2: Define the Identity and Purpose of the Program

Once there is agreement on why the curriculum is being revised, the next step is to define the identity and purpose of the program. This conversation should happen before decisions are made about courses, concentrations, or credit hours. Ideally, it should not occur only during curriculum revision. Strong programs cultivate an ongoing culture of reflection about their identity, purpose, and future, and not just when a crisis forces the conversation. Programs that skip this step often end up with curricula that are internally inconsistent, difficult to explain to prospective students, and difficult to sustain over time.

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Protect the Identity of the Field

Peace and conflict studies is an interdisciplinary field, but interdisciplinarity should not be confused with the absence of disciplinary focus. Faculty frequently enter the field from political science, sociology, psychology, anthropology, law, education, or religion, bringing the questions and methods of their home disciplines with them. This diversity is a strength. Without intentional conversation about program identity, however, curricula can gradually become collections of disciplinary perspectives rather than coherent peace and conflict studies programs. Curriculum committees should ask what makes their program a peace and conflict studies program rather than a collection of courses from different departments. For instance, the core overarching objectives for the program should be used to then determine the core courses and the content, as well as what courses could be selected as electives.

Instead of allowing for any elective, do the electives introduce, reinforce, and/or demonstrate the core outcomes of the program? As each professor has flexibility as to what is taught, the core course outline from which syllabi are developed should be used to determine if the course helps achieve the core learning outcomes of the program.

Think Globally While Responding to Local Contexts

Peace and conflict studies is inherently a global field. While curricula should respond to institutional missions and local communities, they should also introduce students to scholarship, case studies, and practices from around the world. Graduates increasingly work across cultures and communities, and even those whose careers remain local will benefit from understanding how conflict, peacebuilding, and social transformation are approached in different contexts.

Build a Broad Program with a Clear Identity

Small programs often feel pressure to define themselves through a narrow niche. A broader curriculum allows students to discover different areas of the field while providing greater flexibility in career pathways. This is particularly valuable for programs housed within larger academic units, which can draw on affiliated faculty from related disciplines while maintaining a coherent identity. Breadth, however, should not come at the expense of coherence. A broad curriculum is not one that tries to be everything, but rather incorporates courses that support the program's learning outcomes.

Integrate Theory and Practice Rather Than Choosing Between Them

One of the most persistent debates in peace and conflict studies concerns the balance between theory and practice. This is a false choice. Effective practice depends on conceptual understanding, just as meaningful theory is enriched through practice. Teaching students to mediate or facilitate without helping them understand conflict, power, identity, culture, and structural inequality

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reduces peace and conflict studies to technical skill development. Conversely, students who understand theories of conflict but have never applied them are equally underprepared.

Peace and conflict studies are often confused with dispute resolution. Dispute resolution is an important part of the field, but only one part. Curriculum committees should focus less on counting theory courses versus practice courses and more on ensuring theory informs practice and practice deepens theory throughout the curriculum.

Translate the Degree for the Labor Market

Peace and conflict studies has a perception problem in the U.S. labor market, and curriculum design is part of the answer. Many employers who would readily hire a graduate do not recognize the degree at first sight. They know what a public policy or social work graduate does, but are less certain about a master's in peace and conflict studies unless the program has translated its outcomes into professional language they recognize. This is not a reason to abandon the field's intellectual identity. It is a reason to be deliberate about how that identity is described in program materials, learning outcomes, and advising documents, and to name and frame courses so they reflect both what the field is and what graduates can say they can do on the first day of a job. That translation starts in the curriculum, and it matters more as AI screens cover letters, resumes, and CVs for career terminology.

Respond to Change Without Chasing Trends

Curricula should evolve as the field evolves, but not be driven by temporary buzzwords. Programs built around catchphrases need repeated redesign as trends change. Market research should inform curriculum rather than determine it. Today's students may work in mediation, humanitarian organizations, education, nonprofit leadership, government, or fields that do not yet exist. The competencies they need, such as conflict analysis, facilitation, negotiation, ethical reasoning, and intercultural competence, will remain valuable regardless of employment trends. Programs should prepare students for careers they cannot yet predict, not just jobs that are popular today.

Artificial intelligence is one trend programs can no longer ignore. Students should become familiar with its applications, limitations, and ethical implications for peace and conflict work. But AI should be integrated thoughtfully across the curriculum rather than driving its design, strengthening the curriculum without displacing the knowledge, competencies, and values that define the field.

Step 3: Design the Curriculum

Once the identity and purpose of the program have been established, the committee can begin designing the curriculum itself. At this stage, the temptation is to ask, "What courses do we want to offer?" A more useful question is, "What curriculum can we realistically offer well, year after year?" The goal is not to design the ideal curriculum on paper. It is to design a curriculum that teaches the learning outcomes and can be consistently delivered with the faculty, resources, and institutional support the program actually has.

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Build Around Faculty Expertise and Be Honest About Capacity

Curriculum committees should design around the faculty they have, not the faculty they hope to hire. Every required course should be mapped to both the program's learning outcomes and a named, available instructor. A course with no instructor should not appear in the core curriculum. This matters most for low-enrollment programs, where limited budgets make it hard to hire adjuncts or specialists. Relying heavily on temporary instructors for required courses can make those courses hard to offer consistently, delaying student progress and creating scheduling problems that erode trust over time. Required courses should also be able to survive faculty turnover, since building around specialized courses that only one person can teach creates unnecessary vulnerability.

Develop a Strong Core

The core curriculum should introduce, reinforce, and demonstrate the core learning outcomes. The learning outcomes should represent the intellectual foundation of the program. Rather than trying to expose students to every possible topic in the field, it should provide the concepts, theories, skills, and values that every graduate should possess. The learning outcomes also provide continuity when electives change. Every core course should introduce, reinforce and demonstrate components of the core learning outcomes. If the answer to the question: *What would every graduate lose if this course were removed?* If the answer is, *not much*, it probably belongs among the electives rather than the core. Curriculum committees should spend considerably more time discussing the core than the electives.

Name Courses for the World Outside the Field

The terminology of peace and conflict studies is the subject of active debate within the field, but that debate belongs in the classroom more than in the course catalog. Terms such as *conflict transformation* carry important intellectual meaning but may be unfamiliar to employers, graduate admissions committees, and prospective students. The goal is to preserve intellectual complexity while making the curriculum accessible.

Rethink the Skills Curriculum

A related debate concerns which skills courses belong in the program. The original skills courses, such as mediation, negotiation, and facilitation, remain important, but the field now encompasses a much wider range of practices. Rather than creating a new course for every emerging approach, programs should consider broader skills courses which include the core skills of conflict management from which the other models are built - such as mediation, restorative justice, dialogue processes, interest based negotiation, that can evolve over time. Those formal models (such as mediation, restorative justice, etc.) can also be taught as professional development options with opportunities to earn certificates or continuing education credits, expanding participation to non-students/community members, etc. This keeps the curriculum manageable while allowing instructors to incorporate new methods without repeated curriculum revision.

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Use Electives Strategically and Manage Course Rotation

Electives provide flexibility for students and programs. For programs housed within larger academic units, electives can often be drawn from related disciplines without requiring the peace and conflict studies program to staff every course itself. For stand-alone programs with limited enrollment, many electives can unintentionally spread students across too many sections with too few people in each. Students are better served by a smaller number of courses offered predictably and well than by an ambitious catalog that is frequently canceled or rescheduled. A thoughtfully managed rotation of electives — offered on a two- or three-year cycle rather than every semester — often serves students better than an extensive list that creates scheduling uncertainty and delays graduation. Programs should list a broader range of electives in the catalog while offering them on a predictable multi-year rotation to maintain viable enrollments.

Resist the Pull Toward Specialization

The pressure to add tracks, concentrations, or specializations is one of the most consistent features in the development of peace and conflict studies programs. Faculty want them, prospective students ask about them, and administrators sometimes encourage them as a recruitment strategy. In practice, specializations in small programs almost always produce the same result: students are spread thin across too many courses, sections become unviable, and the program ends up offering a fragmented version of everything rather than a strong version of anything. A unified curriculum that every student moves through together is not a lesser ambition but a more honest one. If there is genuine demand for specialization, certificates, capstone projects, or special topics courses are far more flexible instruments than formal concentrations, which require their own staffing, scheduling, and minimum-enrollment logic.

Step 4: Build the Program, Not Just the Curriculum

A well-designed curriculum alone will not ensure a successful program. Programs also need institutional visibility, sustained faculty collaboration, community presence, and the flexibility to adapt over time. Curriculum development should be viewed as one component of broader program building, not the end of the work.

Work With What You Have

The goal is not to design a program that would exist in ideal conditions. It is to design the strongest possible program within the institutional context that actually exists. Constraints such as small faculty, shared administrative structures, and borrowed resources are not reasons to wait. They are the conditions within which good programs get built.

Build Relationships Across the Institution

Interdisciplinary programs depend on relationships. Regular conversations with faculty in related disciplines can identify opportunities for cross-listed courses, collaborative research, guest

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lectures, and joint programming. These partnerships strengthen the curriculum and increase the program's visibility across campus. For hosted programs in particular, building these relationships is not optional — it is how the program becomes legible to the institution as a contributor rather than a dependent. Successful interdisciplinary programs are rarely built through ownership alone; they are built through sustained collaboration.

Design for Enrollment Overlap Across Levels

Intentional course sharing across student levels is one of the most effective and underused tools for small programs. Courses that serve undergraduate, master's, and doctoral students simultaneously are not pedagogical shortcuts but a smart use of resources. A course such as Theories of Conflict and Peacebuilding can legitimately serve advanced undergraduates and beginning graduate students if the syllabus uses differentiated assignments. A combined section of four undergraduates and four graduate students is a functioning course, whereas eight graduate-only students is rare in a small program. For hosted programs, cross-level courses also serve a political function: they generate enrollment that benefits both the program and the host unit, making the program a visible contributor to the unit's numbers rather than a drain on them.

Think Beyond the Degree

Degree programs are only one way peace and conflict studies can contribute to an institution and a community. Certificates, executive education, professional development workshops, community partnerships, summer institutes, and collaborations with nonprofit organizations, schools, government agencies, and community mediation centers can all extend the program's reach. These initiatives increase visibility, create applied learning opportunities for students, generate community goodwill, and in some cases produce additional revenue. More importantly, they reinforce the applied nature of the field by connecting academic learning with practice in the world. Program development should be understood as building a community of learning around the field, not simply maintaining a degree.

Use Accreditation and External Review Strategically

Program directors in low-enrollment or hosted programs often experience accreditation and external program review as threats that expose and document institutional vulnerability. In practice, a well-managed external review is one of the few occasions when arguments that a director cannot make internally without appearing self-interested can be made by credible outside voices. An external reviewer who recommends dedicated faculty lines, independent administrative status, or a protected curriculum core carries an authority the institution cannot easily dismiss. Directors should prepare strategically for reviews, not defensively, by documenting enrollment trends with context, presenting the curriculum's rationale clearly, and briefing reviewers honestly about the structural constraints the program operates under. A review that produces a strong external report can move an institutional conversation forward by years.

Step 5: Manage the Revision Process

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Even the strongest curriculum proposal can fail if the revision process itself is poorly managed. Curriculum revision is both an academic exercise and an organizational process. It requires clear leadership, honest communication, and a willingness to navigate disagreement without being paralyzed by it.

Recognize That Disagreement Is Normal — and That Some Is Not

Faculty rarely disagree because they care too little about the curriculum, but because they care deeply about different parts of it. Disagreements become more manageable once the underlying concerns are named, so program directors should create space for faculty to explain the reasoning behind their positions. At the same time, not all resistance reflects principled disagreement. It may also reflect concerns about course ownership, departmental responsibilities, or the impact of change on existing practices. A program director needs to distinguish between the two. Disagreement that engages the substance of the curriculum deserves genuine engagement. The rest is resistance to change, and program directors should not allow it to stall the process indefinitely.

Know When Consultation Ends and Decisions Begin

Consultation is essential, but it should not become endless. Program directors must balance participation with progress, since not every suggestion can be incorporated and not every disagreement will be resolved. Once faculty have had meaningful opportunities to contribute, decisions must be made so the curriculum can move through institutional approval. Programs that wait for unanimous agreement often cannot respond to changing institutional circumstances. Prolonged consultation without resolution is itself a decision, one that cedes the process to those most resistant to change. The goal is not complete agreement but sufficient agreement to move the program forward.

Involve Students and Alumni Thoughtfully

Students and alumni provide valuable perspectives that faculty cannot fully replicate. Current students can speak to their experience of the curriculum from the inside, on what feels coherent, what feels missing, and where they feel underprepared. Alumni can speak from professional experience about what actually served them after graduation and what did not. Both voices deserve a place in the revision process. At the same time, curriculum design remains the responsibility of faculty, who must balance these perspectives with disciplinary knowledge, institutional expectations, and long-term program goals. Input from both students and alumni should inform decisions rather than determine them.

Work With Administration Rather Than Against It

Faculty governance is an essential feature of higher education, but curriculum revision also occurs within institutional structures that include department chairs, deans, provosts, and governing boards. Program directors should invest time in understanding institutional priorities before

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proposals are fully formed, not after, and communicate clearly how the proposed curriculum supports them. Whether the issue is enrollment, retention, affordability, or student success, demonstrating alignment increases the likelihood that proposals will receive sustained support — not just initial approval. A curriculum can be academically sound, institutionally approved, and still fragile if the administration lacks the sustained will to defend it against persistent opposition over time.

Conclusion: Curriculum Development Is Never Finished

Curriculum development is not a one-time event. It is an ongoing process of reflection, adaptation, and renewal. For peace and conflict studies programs operating in challenging institutional contexts, success is not about designing the perfect curriculum. It is about creating a program that remains intellectually coherent while adapting to changing institutional realities.

No curriculum will ever be finished. New faculty will join, students will change, institutions will evolve, and the field itself will continue to grow. The task of the program director is not to design the final curriculum, but to create a program capable of learning, adapting, and remaining faithful to its purpose for a reasonable amount of time.