

Building, Sustaining, and Sunsetting Innovation Programs in Higher Education: Lessons Learned

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Article

Abstract

Innovation programs in higher education advance professional development and meet evolving needs of both students and institutions. This article examines the lifecycle of various innovation programs in nursing education, including building, sustaining, and sunsetting of various recent initiatives developed in a college of nursing with robust innovation programming. Drawing on case studies such as the Master of Healthcare Innovation (MHI) program, the IDEA Workshop, and the Innovation Studio, the article explores how these programs were developed to meet specific gaps, strategies used to maintain their momentum, and sometimes challenges that led to their conclusion. The findings of our program review highlight the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration, feedback-driven program development, and the need for tailored approaches based on the unique needs of each organization. Lessons learned demonstrate that while innovation frameworks offer valuable guidance, they cannot simply be replicated across institutions without adaptation. Successful programs were those that evolved to reflect diverse perspectives and maintained flexibility in addressing emerging challenges. The article offers implications for education and practice and concludes with a recommendation that sustainable innovation in higher education requires a balance of structured leadership, ongoing stakeholder engagement, and adaptability to ensure long-term impact.

Key Words: Nursing innovation, higher education, program development, interprofessional collaboration, heutagogy, sustainability, Complexity Theory, innovation programs, healthcare leadership, stakeholder engagement

Innovation is the process of implementing new products, services, and/or solutions that create new value ([Melnik & Raderstorf, 2025](#)). Innovation plays a pivotal role in advancing higher education by fostering creativity, adaptation, and continuous improvement in teaching and learning methodologies. The Ohio State University (OSU) is a land grant university, and the College of Nursing (CON) is part of the university’s vast health sciences offerings. The OSU CON has been consistently top-ranked as a research and degree-granting program. The CON offers traditional baccalaureate, graduate, and certificate programs for nurses as well as several non-nursing degrees, including Health and Wellness Innovation in Healthcare, Master of Clinical Research, and Master of Healthcare Innovation.

The College of Nursing has robust innovation programming including extended reality clinical simulation training and the only interdisciplinary makerspace on campus. The college houses the Fuld Institute for Evidence-Based Practice, the nation’s pre-eminent program for the dissemination and implementation of evidence-based practice for healthcare professionals. The integration of robust innovation programs like extended reality clinical simulation training and interdisciplinary makerspaces reflects a broader trend in higher education, where institutions are being urged to innovate to remain competitive and effective in preparing future professionals ([Christensen & Eyring, 2011](#)).

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Our primary research has provided valuable insights into how various nursing institutions have supported innovation through structural frameworks, faculty engagement and mentoring, and the development of innovation ecosystems. (Barr et al., 2021) This article aims to expand upon these findings and deepen our understanding of the role of innovation in higher education by examining a decade of innovation within a single organization. Specifically, we examine eight innovation programs that have been launched at Ohio State, focusing on how each program was conceived and implemented, the unique lifecycle each program experienced, and the key lessons learned throughout the process (see Table 1). This focused case study explored the evolution of efforts, challenges faced, and successful strategies to foster and sustain innovation in one of the nursing profession’s most innovative organizations. Within, we offer specific lessons and best practices that can inform broader innovation efforts in nursing and higher education.

Table 1. *Brief Program Description and Summary of Lessons Learned*

Program Title	Program Description	Lessons Learned
Master in Healthcare Innovation (MHI)	A 31-credit, part-time, online program launched in 2016 to equip healthcare professionals with transformational leadership skills and foster a culture of innovation in healthcare. This program includes interdisciplinary coursework and a capstone project that applies innovation concepts in real-world contexts.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Regular evaluations and adaptability are crucial to maintain program relevance.Interdisciplinary collaboration and online flexibility support working professionals and foster sustainable growth.
IDEA (Innovation, Design, & Entrepreneurship Amplified) Workshop	A two-day in-person workshop designed to provide healthcare professionals with innovation and entrepreneurship skills (e.g., starting a business or implementing organizational innovation). The program adapted to offer virtual attendance but ultimately prioritized in-person sessions for engagement.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Leadership transitions pose challenges, especially when programs rely on a single leader.Feedback and diversified planning teams are vital to align content with participant needs.Partnerships and sponsorships can foster sustainability.
Innovation Studio	A mobile, nurse-led makerspace launched to encourage interdisciplinary collaboration across campus. This program allowed participants to pitch ideas and receive funding to develop solutions to healthcare challenges. Studio locations rotated across high-traffic areas on campus, with a focus on accessibility and collaboration.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Adaptability, support from cross-functional teams, and institutional commitment are essential for sustaining innovation.Documenting processes and broadening leadership responsibilities are also critical to maintaining continuity, especially during organizational transitions (e.g., the pandemic).
Starting Line	Community-focused initiative launched with a \$10,000 grant to bring resources, prototyping tools, and mentoring to aspiring entrepreneurs in Columbus. Workshops offered one-on-one mentoring and access to equipment in collaboration with local businesses.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Sustainable financial planning is necessary for long-term impact.Balancing logistics (e.g., location and timing) with community needs is essential for engagement.Building community partnerships early can support ongoing program viability.
Interprofessional Innovation Symposium	A platform established to highlight interdisciplinary success stories in healthcare innovation. Featuring speakers with diverse expertise, the symposium focused on the role of collaboration in launching successful healthcare ventures, attracting professionals from healthcare, engineering, and design.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Securing stable leadership and organizational support is crucial for continuity.Events dependent on specific leaders are vulnerable to program interruptions if those leaders depart or organizational priorities shift.Distributing leadership roles and maintaining commitment from multiple stakeholders can help ensure sustainability.

National Innovation Summit	<p>A national summit designed to support nurse-led innovation by uniting leaders in practice, research, and education to share best practices and collaborate on advancing healthcare innovation. This program transitioned to a virtual format due to the COVID-19 pandemic.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Formal organizational support is key to sustaining influence.Flexibility allowed the summit to adapt to a virtual format and focus on enhancing standards for accreditation (AACN, 2021), showing that strategic partnerships are essential for ongoing impact in large-scale initiatives.
Innovation Fellowship	<p>A 12-month program aimed at fostering innovation among nursing faculty, using heutagogy (i.e., self-directed learning) to support faculty well-being and professional growth. Fellows work on projects and receive monthly coaching, guided by the "Three C's of Innovation™": creativity, courage, and connection.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Flexible, feedback-informed approaches foster engagement and growth.Heutagogical (self-directed) learning promotes resilience and adaptability.Integrating innovation principles into broader faculty and student training supports a sustainable culture of innovation.
Extended Reality (XR) Program	<p>An initiative integrating virtual reality (VR) into undergraduate nursing education to improve practice readiness among new graduate nurses. This program includes immersive simulations for approximately 700 students and 60 faculty, covering essential skills in a safe, controlled environment.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Flexibility and iterative adjustments based on participant feedback help educational technology initiatives succeed.Early challenges provided valuable insights, emphasizing the importance of patience, adaptability, and continuous improvement to achieve long-term sustainability.

Background and Importance of Innovation in Higher Education

The application of innovation concepts and strategies in nursing education programs promotes critical thinking, problem-solving abilities, and resilience among students...

In the context of nursing education, innovation is particularly crucial as it enhances the preparation of future healthcare professionals to meet evolving healthcare challenges. By integrating innovative approaches (e.g., simulation technologies, interdisciplinary collaboration, heutagogy, and evidence-based practices) nurse educators can better equip students with the skills and knowledge needed to deliver high-quality patient care in diverse and dynamic healthcare settings ([Abraham & Komattil, 2017](#); [Broom, 2015](#)). The application of innovation concepts and strategies in nursing education programs promotes critical thinking, problem-solving abilities, and resilience among students, preparing them to navigate complexities and contribute effectively to improving health outcomes and healthcare delivery systems.

Innovation holds significant importance in nursing education as this content aligns closely with *The Essentials: Core Competencies for Professional Nursing Education* as outlined by the American Association of Colleges of Nursing ([\[AACN\], 2021](#)). These essentials emphasize the integration of cutting-edge technologies, evidence-based practices, and interdisciplinary collaboration to prepare nurses for contemporary healthcare environments. Innovations such as simulation labs, virtual learning environments, and telehealth simulations enhance experiential learning and clinical reasoning skills among nursing students. Innovative teaching strategies promote lifelong learning and adaptation to evolving healthcare trends, equipping nurses with the agility to address complex patient needs effectively ([Comings, 2023](#)). By embracing innovation, nurse educators not only enhance the quality of education but also ensure that graduates are well-prepared to deliver patient-centered care, advocate for health equity, and lead initiatives that drive positive healthcare outcomes.

Innovative teaching strategies promote lifelong learning and adaptation to evolving healthcare trends...

Detailed Review of Eight Innovation Programs

One such example of a forward-thinking, innovation-driven program at OSU is the Master of Healthcare Innovation (MHI). This degree program was developed to address a critical gap in healthcare leadership and to foster a culture of innovation within healthcare organizations. This section begins with discussion of the MHI degree program and continues with more

detailed descriptions of these innovative programs. We include a program overview, discussion of lifecycle, and reflections on lessons learned from the eight innovation programs affiliated with OSU.

Master in Healthcare Innovation Program (MHI)

Program Overview. The Master in Healthcare Innovation (MHI) program at Ohio State University was launched in 2016 under the direction of the CON Dean, Dr. Bernadette Melnyk, who identified a pressing need for healthcare leaders with skills in fostering innovation. This program, one of the first of its kind nationwide, was created by a team of leading experts in healthcare innovation, including Dr. T. Porter O’Grady, Dr. Kathy Malloch, and Dr. Dan Weberg, along with other CON faculty. Building on a model previously developed at Arizona State University, the MHI program aims to provide healthcare professionals with transformative leadership skills specifically geared toward driving innovation across healthcare settings (Porter-O’Grady & Malloch, 2016; Weberg et al., 2019). By integrating principles from organizational culture, health policy, and technology, the program seeks to equip healthcare leaders to navigate the complexities of modern healthcare.

The MHI program design reflects a commitment to foster advanced competencies that address significant healthcare challenges through innovation. Program objectives include developing skills in health system leadership, promoting interprofessional collaboration, and cultivating the analytical abilities needed to shape and implement evidence-based innovation frameworks. Additionally, the program content promotes leadership in high-impact areas (e.g., quality improvement, patient safety, and healthcare outcomes) thereby positioning graduates to contribute meaningfully within their organizations and across the broader healthcare landscape.

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Program Lifecycle. The MHI program is a multi-disciplinary, 31-credit, part-time program that spans five consecutive semesters, ending with a capstone project that challenges students to apply their innovation leadership skills in practical, real-world contexts. The online format is designed to attract professionals from various healthcare disciplines (e.g., nursing, medicine, pharmacy) and allows students to maintain their careers while completing the degree. Courses cover critical areas including transformational leadership, communication, culture, and design thinking. By fostering a learning environment that brings together professionals from diverse fields, the program creates a rich, collaborative setting to promote diverse perspectives on innovation.

Initially, one of the primary challenges in launching the MHI program was faculty recruitment. Given its online nature and focus on healthcare innovation, finding educators with the right balance of subject matter expertise and experience in an innovative, digital learning environment was essential. The CON leaders were committed to funding the program to sustain enrollment levels at a minimum of 30 students, a goal that has consistently been met, with a record enrollment of 54 students in recent years. Each year, program administrators conduct evaluations to assess quality, faculty support, and enrollment, ensuring that the program adapts to maintain its relevance and impact.

Lessons Learned. The MHI program has demonstrated that a commitment to interdisciplinary collaboration and regular assessment is key to sustaining an innovation-focused educational program. Annual reviews have enabled the program to remain adaptive, with adjustments made to meet the changing needs of students and the healthcare industry. This adaptability, paired with a robust online structure, has allowed the program to maintain strong enrollment and continuously produce healthcare leaders skilled in driving innovation. For other institutions seeking to establish similar programs, it is essential to prioritize interdisciplinary collaboration, flexible structures that support working professionals, and dedicated resources to ensure sustainable growth and impact.

IDEA (Innovation, Design, and Entrepreneurship Amplified) Workshop

Program Overview. The IDEA Workshop was developed to address a gap in accessible, innovation-focused training for healthcare professionals interested in entrepreneurship and intrapreneurship. Based on feedback from global nursing professionals, it became evident that there was an unmet need for structured educational programs that provided practical skills to implement innovative solutions or launch entrepreneurial ventures in healthcare. The workshop was designed as a two-day, hands-on event where attendees could learn specific, actionable skills, ranging from starting a business to developing innovative solutions within existing organizations. Although the program was founded by nurses, it aimed to serve a diverse healthcare audience, creating an inclusive environment where participants from various fields could learn to innovate in their professional practices.

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The IDEA Workshop curriculum was carefully designed to provide attendees with tools and resources needed to foster innovation and entrepreneurship. This program aimed to fill a crucial gap by offering education that could be applied across professional roles and sectors in healthcare, allowing attendees to gain insights not only into launching their own ventures but also into contributing innovative solutions in their workplaces. By focusing on real-world

innovative solutions or launch entrepreneurial ventures in healthcare.

applications and tangible outcomes, the workshop enabled healthcare professionals to expand their skill sets and make informed decisions about innovation in their careers. The link to Supplemental Materials offers an example of the 2019 agenda for this workshop.

Supplemental Materials

Program Lifecycle. The first IDEA Workshop was held in October 2015, with a budget of approximately \$10,000 approved by the dean. Developed by the Director of Continuing Education with input from university technology commercialization experts, the program attracted approximately 50 healthcare professionals from across the country. Planning and executing the event posed challenges as the team was relatively new to conference planning and initially had limited logistical resources. Feedback from participants indicated a demand for more diverse perspectives, leading the team leaders to establish a larger, interdisciplinary planning committee to enhance future workshop iterations.

In 2016, the IDEA Workshop offered a virtual attendance option, a novel approach for conferences at the time. However, limited demand for virtual participation, coupled with the high workload involved in facilitating a virtual event, led the team to revert to in-person sessions in subsequent years. Over time, the workshop became more comprehensive. By 2019, sponsorships and a broadened planning team had helped to secure financial sustainability for this program. Although the workshop drew over 750 attendees in total, shifting leadership priorities and the departure of the program founder led to its discontinuation after 2020, underscoring the importance of sustainable leadership models for program longevity.

Lessons Learned. The IDEA Workshop underscored the importance of diversifying leadership and planning roles to mitigate risks associated with single-person dependency. A key takeaway from the workshop's lifecycle was the critical need for distributed responsibility, ensuring continuity even when key leaders move on. Additionally, early feedback indicated that understanding audience needs and preferences (e.g., gauging interest in virtual versus in-person options) was essential to program success. While this program was offered, building a broad base of support, from interdisciplinary planning teams to external sponsorships, proved invaluable in fostering program sustainability and enhancing the learning experience for participants.

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Innovation Studio

Program Overview. The Innovation Studio is a unique, nurse-led, mobile makerspace developed by CON leaders to promote interdisciplinary collaboration and innovation across the university. Launched as the nation's first mobile makerspace led by nurses, the Innovation Studio created an accessible platform for students, faculty, and staff from diverse disciplines to work together on impactful solutions to pressing healthcare challenges. The mobile studio, stationed in high-traffic campus areas such as libraries and lobbies of key departments, served as a hub for individuals eager to turn their innovative ideas into actions, regardless of their background or expertise.

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Positioning itself as a collaborative space for problem-solving, the Innovation Studio encouraged teams composed of individuals from different disciplines to address issues of health and well-being. At each location, teams presented ideas at pitch days and were eligible for initial funding if they demonstrated cross-disciplinary collaboration. This approach fostered a supportive environment for innovation, helping participants access resources and guidance while cultivating a culture of creativity and problem-solving. The Innovation Studio mission aligned with the broader goal of empowering clinicians and researchers to address real-world challenges

in healthcare.

Program Lifecycle. The concept of the Innovation Studio emerged from the CON Chief Innovation Officer, who had faced challenges navigating the university Technology Commercialization Office. This experience inspired the creation of a space where healthcare professionals and students could access resources to bring their ideas to life. Generous initial funding from donors Connie and Gary Sharpe covered startup and operational costs, enabling the studio to make a significant impact within its first three years. A stationary site was later added through partnerships and grants, further expanding its reach. By 2021, over 1,100 participants had engaged in the Innovation Studio, resulting in patent applications, published works, and an international licensing deal for a medical device developed within the studio.

This success garnered national and international recognition, including awards from Columbus Business First and InfectionControl.Tips (Diamond, 2018; Ohio State University, 2018). However, the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the mobile operations of the studio, requiring the team to re-evaluate its format. In 2022, the opening of Heminger Hall led to the consolidation of studio locations, with a permanent site established in the new CON innovation center. Plans for the

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future include a more agile version, “Innovation Studio (Mobile) 2.0,” focused on outreach, reducing costs, and expanding accessibility through the ISpark Cart initiative, which brings design resources directly to clinical units in partnership with the Ohio State University Design Department.

Lessons Learned. The journey of the Innovation Studio demonstrated the importance of adaptability, collaborative support, and institutional commitment to sustaining an innovation program. Establishing partnerships with donors, securing grants, and maintaining strong interdisciplinary collaboration were all essential to its success. Moreover, the Innovation Studio highlighted the potential of frontline clinicians as innovators, affirming that accessible, flexible environments can empower them to create impactful solutions. Future programs can benefit from embedding institutional knowledge and fostering shared leadership to ensure continuity, especially when scaling or navigating transitions like those caused by the pandemic.

Starting Line

Program Overview. Building on the success of the Innovation Studio, the Starting Line initiative was created to extend Innovation Studio services to the broader Columbus community. Supported by a \$10,000 grant from the *Create Columbus Commission*, the Starting Line aimed to provide resources for aspiring entrepreneurs to take initial or subsequent steps in their ventures. The program was designed to offer physical space and essential tools for new and early-stage entrepreneurs within Columbus to access guidance and equipment to bring their ideas to life, facilitating community-driven innovation.

The goal was to make innovation accessible for those who might not have formal support networks...

The Starting Line focused on fostering an inclusive environment where individuals from diverse backgrounds could gain access to prototyping tools, entrepreneurial resources, and one-on-one mentorship. The goal was to make innovation accessible for those who might not have formal support networks, ultimately expanding the reach and impact of the Innovation Studio model. By bringing these resources to local businesses and community spaces, the Starting Line initiative sought to empower individuals at all stages of their entrepreneurial journey, supporting innovation at the grassroots level.

Program Lifecycle. Each month, the Innovation Studio team transported essential equipment (e.g., 3D printers and laser cutters) to local businesses, where they conducted four-hour workshops. These sessions provided attendees with access to tools and one-on-one guidance from mentors in fields like marketing, fundraising, and product development. The location of each event and the involvement of local business owners who shared their entrepreneurial insights significantly influenced attendance and engagement. However, finding times that worked for both attendees and host businesses posed challenges, particularly as scheduling needs often conflicted with normal business hours. Ultimately, the team determined that renting a dedicated space during business hours was more effective than adapting to each host’s schedule.

With funding from the *Create Columbus Commission*, the Starting Line hosted monthly sessions as well as a year-end, full-day event, engaging over 100 participants throughout its run. Despite positive community reception, the program was unable to secure additional funding for ongoing operations, leading to its conclusion after the final full-day conference. This decision was communicated in advance to ensure that attendees could maximize their experience. The experience underscored the challenges of securing sustainable financial support for community-focused innovation programs.

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Lessons Learned. The Starting Line highlighted the importance of long-term funding strategies in sustaining community-based innovation initiatives. While short-term grants are valuable for launching pilot programs, sustainable impact requires financial support that extends beyond initial phases. Future initiatives should incorporate funding strategies and seek partnerships with organizations that share a commitment to community innovation to ensure ongoing program viability. The experience also reinforced the need to align event logistics with the needs of participants, suggesting that flexibility in venue and timing is key to maximizing engagement.

Interprofessional Innovation Symposium

Program Overview. The Interprofessional Innovation Symposium was inspired by an impactful story shared by Dr. Kathryn Bowles from the University of Pennsylvania (personal communication, July 2017). Dr. Bowles discussed how she successfully commercialized her research by partnering with a former student who contributed complementary skills in business and engineering. Motivated by this story, the CON invited Dr. Bowles and her business partner, Eric Heil, to speak at the symposium inaugural event. Their collaboration demonstrated the power of interdisciplinary partnerships, setting a standard for the types of innovation stories the symposium would feature in future events.

The symposium officially launched in 2017, providing a platform for healthcare, engineering, and design professionals to explore the intersections of their fields in a collaborative setting. Each year, the symposium highlighted businesses founded by interdisciplinary teams, drawing over 100 attendees from healthcare, engineering, design, and startup communities. The

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success of this event further validated the need for interprofessional collaboration in healthcare innovation and reinforced the value of partnerships that leverage diverse skill sets to drive progress in clinical and technological advancements.

Program Lifecycle. The Interprofessional Innovation Symposium was initially funded by an endowed lecture series within the CON. Subsequent years saw support from the dean’s discretionary fund and external sponsorships. The event continued annually through 2019, gaining traction as a networking and knowledge-sharing opportunity for innovators across multiple disciplines. Unfortunately, plans for the fourth symposium in April 2020 were disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to the cancellation of the event. Although there were initial discussions about rescheduling, competing priorities and shifts in organizational focus ultimately prevented the event from continuing.

Challenges faced after 2020 underscored the difficulty of maintaining program momentum without the support of dedicated leadership or sufficient time for new leaders to integrate the event into their responsibilities. The departure of key organizers, coupled with changing institutional priorities, made it challenging to sustain the symposium, highlighting how essential leadership continuity and institutional commitment are to long-term program viability.

Lessons Learned. The symposium experience illustrated the importance of securing stable leadership and organizational support for continuity. Programs that rely on individual leaders can struggle to endure when those leaders transition or when organizational priorities shift. Future symposiums or similar events can benefit from structuring leadership roles so that responsibilities are distributed across multiple individuals or teams, reducing dependence on any single person and helping maintain continuity in program delivery.

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The National Innovation Summit

Program Overview. In 2019, CON leaders recognized the need for a national platform to advance nurse-led innovation and build a network of leaders in practice, research, and education. The Chief Innovation Officer and the Director of the Master of Healthcare Innovation program proposed a national summit that would bring together experts to exchange best practices, support nurse-led initiatives, and foster collaboration. The CON Dean endorsed the idea, envisioning a collaborative event to drive progress in healthcare innovation by uniting thought leaders in an impactful format.

The National Innovation Summit aimed to create a collaborative framework where leaders could share insights and establish actionable plans to promote nurse-led innovation within their organizations and beyond. The event sought to bridge gaps between research, education, and practice, helping to identify common goals and create a cohesive approach to advance the role of nurses in healthcare innovation on a national scale.

Program Lifecycle. Initially planned as an in-person event, the summit was met with enthusiasm from invitees, who committed to participating. However, pandemic restrictions necessitated a shift to a virtual format, which took place in 2021. During the online event, participants collaborated in small groups to develop strategic plans for research, education, and practice through a structured PainStorming activity. While the virtual format facilitated valuable discussions, it soon became evident that meaningful long-term impact would require backing from an established nursing organization to reach a broader audience and sustain influence.

This shift in focus allowed the team to channel their efforts toward a specific initiative with broad applicability.

Without a formal institutional sponsor, the summit team pivoted to focus on enhancing the AACN (2021) *Essentials* with innovative educational content, drawing on insights from the summit. This shift in focus allowed the team to channel their efforts toward a specific initiative with broad applicability. The experience highlighted the limitations of one-off events and underscored the need for strategic partnerships to sustain momentum for large-scale initiatives.

Lessons Learned. The National Innovation Summit demonstrated that formal organizational support is critical when driving large-scale initiatives. While grassroots enthusiasm can drive short-term success, sustained influence often requires alignment with established institutions that can lend credibility and reach. Additionally, the need for flexibility became evident, as the team successfully adapted their approach to focus on AACN (2021) *Essentials* content, which may have a more lasting impact. Future large-scale initiatives can benefit from identifying strategic partners early in the planning stages to ensure long-term viability.

Innovation Fellowship

Program Overview. The Innovation Fellowship at the Ohio State University CON is a 12-month program designed to foster a culture of innovation among faculty while supporting their well-being. Launched in response to a 2019 survey, the fellowship addresses a dual need identified by the CON nursing faculty: a strong interest in innovation and a lack of confidence in applying innovation concepts to their professional roles. Using heutagogy (i.e., a self-directed learning approach that empowers participants to take ownership of their projects) the fellowship encourages fellows to pursue personalized innovation projects with the support of monthly coaching sessions ([Blaschke, 2012](#); [Hase & Kenyon, 2000](#)). This diverse cohort includes nurse scientists, leaders, clinicians, and educators, all working toward enhancing their innovation skills, promoting well-being, and cultivating a growth-oriented mindset.

The foundational principles of the fellowship, known as the "Three C's of Innovation™" are creativity, courage, and connection. This foundation establishes a supportive environment in which fellows feel encouraged to take risks and push the boundaries of their work. Monthly coaching sessions provide both individual and group support, allowing fellows to develop specific skills in leadership and innovation. With its emphasis on heutagogy ([Blaschke, 2012](#); [Hase & Kenyon, 2000](#)), the program promotes learner autonomy, enabling participants to direct their learning experience and integrate innovative approaches within their professional roles. By empowering faculty to influence healthcare education through innovative thinking, the fellowship ultimately enhances progressive, forward-thinking leadership within the CON ([Barr et al., 2024](#)).

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Program Lifecycle. The fellowship began with the formation of a small group, known as the "Dream Team," which focused on fostering connections and creativity among participants. Securing resources and engaging key stakeholders were essential steps to establish a strong foundation, with support from the Center for Healthcare Innovation and Leadership, as well as collaboration with faculty from the Innovation Studio and the Teaching Innovation Excellence and Scholarship (TIES) Academy. Through this cross-departmental partnership, the fellowship aligned its goals to address the evolving needs of participants, ensuring sustained engagement and value for fellows.

To maintain high levels of participation, the fellowship adopted a "Structure of Fluidity" approach, balancing structured goals with flexible learning paths. This allowed participants to engage with content at their own pace while meeting deadlines to foster accountability. Reducing formal learning modules in favor of conversation-based, hands-on projects ensured that fellows remained actively involved and motivated. This feedback-informed approach emphasized both individual and collective growth, allowing fellows to draw on a wide range of resources and perspectives from across the university, and ultimately producing significant outcomes in terms of innovation and professional growth ([Barr et al., 2023](#)).

Lessons Learned. Emphasis on self-directed learning and flexible support structures within the Innovation Fellowship has led to substantial growth among fellows, enhancing both their innovation competencies and overall well-being. Fellows reported increased camaraderie, confidence, and competence in navigating their roles, moving from a fixed to an innovation-oriented mindset. Participants also noted an improved ability to manage stress and burnout, reflecting the fellowship's dual focus on well-being and professional growth ([Barr & Nathenson, 2022](#)).

The program's impact extended beyond individual growth, with fellows actively integrating innovation skills into broader nursing education efforts. Building on this foundation, CON leaders are now working to incorporate innovation competencies into the nursing curriculum, enabling students to acquire these skills early in their academic careers. The success of this fellowship demonstrates the value of heutagogy and flexible learning in healthcare education, underscoring how creativity, courage, and connection can be harnessed to drive meaningful, sustainable change ([Blaschke, 2012](#); [Hase & Kenyon, 2000](#)). By embedding innovation principles within both faculty and student training, the program contributes to a lasting culture of innovation that supports resilience, adaptability, and lifelong learning in healthcare.

The success of this fellowship demonstrates the value of heutagogy and flexible learning in healthcare education...

AR/VR Program

Program Overview. The CON Extended Reality (XR) Program was developed in response to the American Nurses Foundation's "Reimagining Nursing" request for proposals ([American Nurses Foundation, n.d.](#); [Ohio State University, 2022](#)), which encouraged initiatives to address practice readiness for new graduate nurses. Recognizing the potential of virtual reality in preparing students for real-world clinical experiences, the team integrated VR into the undergraduate curriculum. This program included approximately 700 students and 60 faculty members, and Ohio State was one of only ten grant recipients out of 340 applicants, signifying the potential impact of this innovative approach.

The XR Program uses VR simulations to bridge gaps in clinical training, providing a controlled environment where students can practice and refine skills. By exposing students to realistic scenarios and allowing them to engage in hands-on learning without patient risk, the program addresses critical aspects of clinical preparation, improving confidence, competency, and decision-making in patient care. The program exemplifies how technology can enhance traditional educational models to better equip students for professional practice.

Program Lifecycle. The XR Program launched in May 2022, with initial efforts focused on selecting VR hardware and software, securing lab space, hiring staff, and establishing an evaluation plan. The first year involved extensive training for both students and faculty, with many lessons learned regarding operational challenges and optimal program design. As the program progressed into its second year, refinements were made to improve user experience and ensure long-term sustainability, including plans for covering ongoing costs associated with hardware, software, and personnel.

...refinements were made to improve user experience and ensure long-term sustainability, including plans for covering ongoing costs...

In its third year, the XR Program continues to receive positive feedback from students and faculty. The program has expanded to involve partnerships with local medical centers, with outcome data collected to assess the impact on student readiness. The team also plans to host a national conference to further explore the role of VR in nursing education, building on insights gained from early challenges to ensure that the program continues to evolve in response to emerging needs.

Lessons Learned. Initial challenges of the XR Program underscored the importance of flexibility and continuous improvement in educational technology initiatives. Early obstacles provided valuable insights into what worked well and what needed adjustment, reinforcing the value of patience, adaptability, and careful planning in program success. Other institutions considering similar programs may benefit from adopting an iterative approach, allowing for ongoing adjustments based on participant feedback and program outcomes to achieve long-term sustainability.

Implications for Education and Practice

Key Lessons Learned Across Innovation Programs

Table 2 provides a concise summary of the key lessons learned across various innovation programs, highlighting effective strategies and insights critical to sustaining long-term success in healthcare and higher education innovation initiatives. The lessons discussed within are categorized into two main sections: key lessons learned across programs (e.g., the Master of Healthcare Innovation (MHI), the Innovation Studio, the IDEA Workshop, and the Innovation Fellowship) and insights for sustaining innovation, which outlines critical factors that emerged as the programs evolved. These lessons emphasize the importance of stakeholder engagement, flexibility, leadership distribution, and financial planning, offering actionable guidance for sustaining innovation in higher education and healthcare settings.

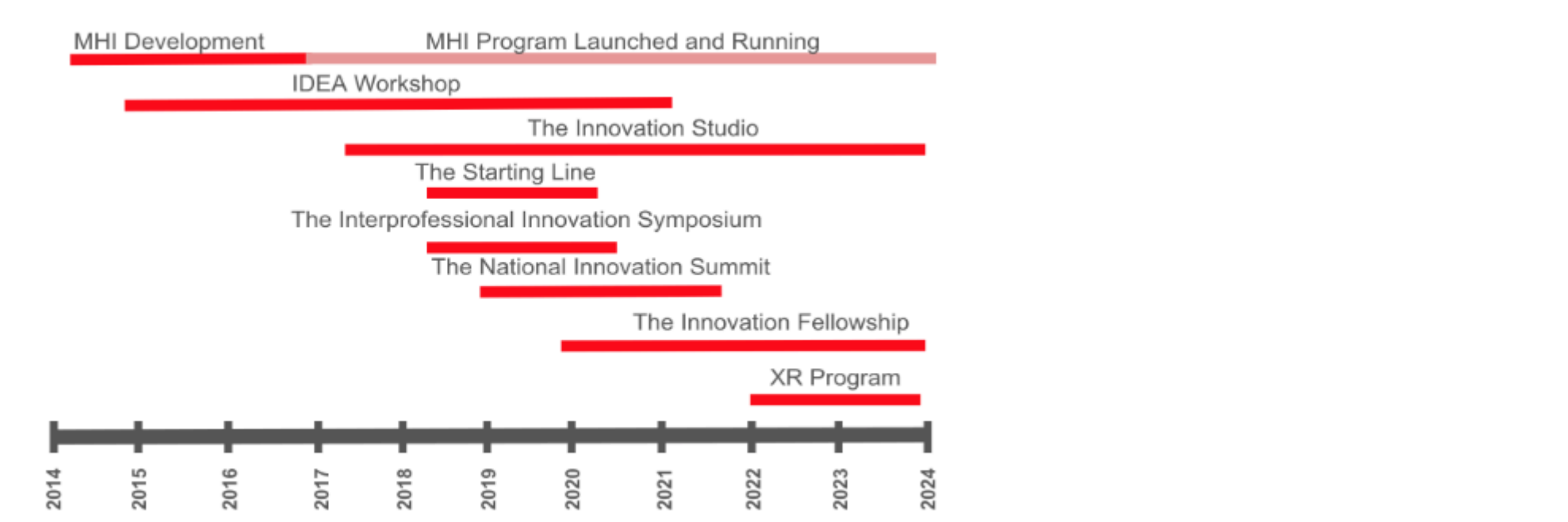
Table 2. Brief Synthesis of Key Lessons Learned

Lesson Category	Insights for Sustaining Innovation
Stakeholder Engagement	Ongoing feedback and strong partnerships ensure program success.
Structure and Flexibility	Balance autonomy with accountability to maintain engagement.
Understanding Participant Needs	Regular feedback keeps programs relevant and valuable.
Best Practices for Success	Flexible frameworks and evaluation support long-term program growth.
Legacy and Knowledge Transfer	Documenting lessons helps sustain impact after program conclusion.
Leadership Transitions	Distributed leadership ensures continuity when key figures depart.
Organizational Support	Strong institutional backing is essential for long-term success.
Agility and Adaptation	Flexibility is crucial for adapting to challenges.
Scalability	Careful resource management is key to maintaining quality while scaling.
Financial Planning	Early planning and diverse funding sources ensure viability.

Lesson Category	Insights for Sustaining Innovation
Feedback as a Growth Tool	Continuous feedback drives engagement and improvement.
Collaborative Teams	Diverse, collaborative planning teams enhance program effectiveness.

Figure 1 illustrates the timeline for the lifespan of each of the innovation programs discussed in this article. Half of these programs are still active.

Figure 1. *Lifespan of OSU Innovation Programs*



Effective Strategies and Common Pitfalls. Across innovation programs like the MHI, the IDEA Workshop, the Innovation Studio, and the Innovation Fellowship, several strategies consistently contributed to success. Iterative development and proactive stakeholder engagement were essential, with ongoing feedback loops driving continuous improvement. Strong partnerships, whether with university leadership, external experts, or interdisciplinary teams, provided the resources and expertise necessary to sustain and enrich these programs.

Common challenges included finding the right balance between structure and flexibility...

Common challenges included finding the right balance between structure and flexibility, particularly in programs that embraced self-directed learning, such as the Innovation Fellowship. Ensuring that participants had enough autonomy to explore innovation while still maintaining accountability proved a delicate balance. Similarly, early missteps in virtual program formats, as seen with the IDEA Workshop, underscored the importance of understanding audience needs and preferences before implementing new delivery methods.

Importance of Partnerships and Understanding Participant Needs. Strong partnerships were critical for the long-term success of programs like the MHI degree and the Innovation Studio. Collaborations across disciplines, external healthcare organizations, and industry leaders enriched program content by bringing together diverse perspectives and resources. These partnerships helped create dynamic, interprofessional learning environments that strengthened the innovation ecosystem.

Equally important was understanding and responding to the evolving needs of participants. Programs that maintained regular communication through surveys, feedback loops, and direct engagement were better positioned to tailor content and delivery methods to their audience. This customer-centric approach kept participants engaged, ensured the programs continued to deliver value, and contributed to their long-term sustainability. Successful innovation programs thrive by being adaptable, nurturing partnerships, and deeply understanding participant needs.

These partnerships helped create dynamic, interprofessional learning environments that strengthened the innovation ecosystem.

Best Practices for Long-Term Success. Sustaining innovation programs requires a strategic focus on flexibility, feedback, and partnerships. One of the most effective strategies was implementing frameworks that allowed participants to take ownership of their learning and innovation processes. The Innovation Fellowship, for example, embraced the self-directed, heutagogical approach (Blaschke, 2012; Hase & Kenyon, 2000) while maintaining enough structure to guide participants and ensure accountability. Striking this balance between structure and autonomy was essential to maintain engagement and foster long-term growth.

One of the most effective strategies was implementing frameworks that allowed participants to take ownership of their learning and innovation processes.

Continuous improvement through feedback was another critical element. Programs that regularly evaluated participant needs and adjusted content based on performance metrics remained relevant even as the healthcare landscape and educational demands evolved. Adaptive strategies ensured that innovation initiatives continued to meet the needs of participants over time.

Ensuring a Positive Legacy and Knowledge Transfer. When innovation programs evolve, sunset, or reach their natural endpoint, ensuring a positive legacy and transferring knowledge becomes crucial. Programs like the IDEA Workshop, which relied heavily on a few key leaders, highlighted the importance of documenting lessons learned and preserving institutional knowledge. Capturing operational insights, strategies, and challenges allowed future initiatives to build on previous successes.

In addition to documentation, facilitating mentorship and knowledge-sharing was vital. For instance, leaders and participants from sunsetting programs like the IDEA Workshop continued to share expertise with the broader institution, ensuring that valuable insights were not lost. Embedding core elements of successful programs, such as the innovation competencies from the Innovation Fellowship, into broader institutional structures also helped to sustain their impact. By integrating innovation skills into nursing curricula, the MHI and Innovation Fellowship ensured that their legacy continued to shape education and healthcare practice beyond the original program lifecycle.

When innovation programs evolve, sunset, or reach their natural endpoint, ensuring a positive legacy and transferring knowledge becomes crucial.

In summary, the key to ensuring the lasting impact of innovation programs lies in documenting lessons learned, fostering mentorship, and embedding essential elements into institutional frameworks. These strategies ensure that even after individual programs conclude, their influence endures, benefiting future initiatives and participants.

Additional Insights for Sustaining Innovation Programs

Building on foundational strategies that contributed to the success of our innovation programs, several additional lessons surfaced as the programs evolved. These insights highlight both the challenges encountered and the critical factors for sustaining and scaling innovation initiatives. The following key takeaways provide a deeper understanding of the complexities involved in leadership transitions, financial planning, adaptability, and participant engagement, all essential for driving long-term success:

- Leadership Transitions Risk Program Continuity:** Programs like the IDEA Workshop and the Interprofessional Innovation Symposium faced challenges when key leaders left, underscoring the need for distributing leadership roles, teams, and responsibilities to ensure continuity and reduce reliance on individual champions.
- Organizational Support is Crucial:** The National Innovation Summit highlighted that long-term success requires strong institutional backing. Without formal organizational support, it is difficult for innovation programs to achieve sustained influence, even with high levels of engagement.
- Agility in Response to Challenges:** Programs like the AR/VR Extended Reality initiative demonstrated the importance of flexibility. External challenges (e.g., the pandemic) reinforced the need for programs to adapt quickly without losing their core focus.
- Balance Between Scalability and Depth:** As seen with the Innovation Studio, scaling programs effectively requires balancing expansion with maintaining quality and impact. Sustainable scaling must include careful resource management to ensure continued success.
- Financial Sustainability is Critical:** Programs like the Starting Line faced difficulties with funding and enrollment, highlighting the need for early financial planning, securing diverse funding streams, and setting realistic financial goals for long-term viability.
- The Power of Feedback:** Programs that embraced continuous feedback, such as the Innovation Fellowship, benefited from evolving based on participant input. This feedback culture fostered engagement and continuous improvement.
- Diverse Planning Teams Enhance Success:** The IDEA Workshop's later success showed the value of diverse and collaborative planning teams. Multiple perspectives lead to more comprehensive programming and stronger participant engagement.

These lessons collectively emphasize the importance of leadership distribution, organizational support, adaptability, financial planning, feedback integration, and collaborative planning for sustaining innovation programs and maximizing their long-term impact.

Conclusion

The journey of building, sustaining, and sunsetting innovation programs in higher education offers valuable lessons. However, complexity theory reminds us that no program can simply be "copied and pasted" into another organization (Melnyk & Raderstorf, 2025). The unique culture, resources, and needs of each institution must inform how innovation initiatives are adapted. While certain frameworks, such as heutagogical approaches or interdisciplinary collaboration, may serve as guiding principles, these must be customized for the specific context of each organization.

The unique culture, resources, and needs of each institution must inform how innovation initiatives are adapted.

To ensure the long-term success of innovation programs, institutional leaders should focus on integrating flexibility into program design, fostering stakeholder engagement, and planning for sustainability through robust legacy and knowledge transfer strategies. Policymakers, educators, and administrators each play critical roles in creating environments where these initiatives can thrive. From securing funding to facilitating interdisciplinary collaborations, each action should be informed by the unique challenges and opportunities present in the organization.

Ultimately, the complexity of innovation in higher education requires a tailored approach that values adaptability over rigid replication. Learning from past successes and failures can foster institutional innovation in a way that best suits unique environments, ensuring meaningful and sustainable impact.

Declaration of Conflicts

No conflicts to declare. Correspondence to: Dr. Tim Raderstorf, Frontier Nursing University, 2050 Lexington Rd, Versailles, KY 40383 (tim.raderstorf@frontier.edu)

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