Let's start by comparing the two images. The one on the left is representative of a traditional, or forward, model of curricular design, and the one on the right represents backward design.

What do you notice?

Backward design begins with identifying student learning outcomes (SLOs) - the skills and competencies defined by academia and industry - rather than generalized topics. This helps students understand the relevance of what they're being taught and why. By operationalizing learning goals, we're examining how an outcome can translate into the real-world.

Continued on the back
In backward design, assessment strategy comes before learning experience activities are designed. Backward design prompts authentic assessments—i.e., assessments that reflect real world scenarios and situations. These authentic assessments capture student grasp of the operationalized outcomes and objectives. Knowing how they are going to evaluate their students helps educators recognize what their students need to be taught to perform well on those assessments. It reduces implicit biases in assessment design.

Learning experiences are aligned with the assessment strategy. The outcomes and assessments dictate content and instruction rather than the other way around. The content and instruction become more specific, tailored, and relevant for students to achieve the intended outcomes.

Why this approach?

While there are many benefits to backward design, the most important is improved student success. A cohesive, backward-designed curriculum amplifies students’ learning of the content against the desired outcomes. It catalyzes their success because they now have the skills to demonstrate their learning in their assessments. Learning becomes transparent and because it is aligned, this curricular design process makes learning and performance easier and more intuitive for the student.