Effecting Consistency Across Curriculum: A Case Study

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ABSTRACT

Continuous quality improvement is the clarion call across all business schools which is driving the emphasis on assessing the attainment of learning outcomes. An issue that deems special attention in assurance of learning outcomes is related to consistency across courses and, more specifically, across multiple sections of the same course taught by different professors. This paper is intended to accomplish the two objectives. First, identify and discuss the situational factors that are driving the need for improving quality through assessment. The expectations of students and parents, employers and graduate programs, accrediting organizations, and faculty are examined in this situational assessment. Second, a review of the process utilized by the School of Business at a small, private, liberal arts college to address consistency issues that adversely impact quality improvement is provided. This process, still in the early stages of evolution, has had a significant impact on the culture of the institution as it strives to meet AACSB requirements. The process described in this paper has been utilized to address concerns and fears of faculty, and has resulted in improvements in consistency among courses in the curriculum. Concluding remarks provide general recommendations that can be used by our peers who aspire to travel down the same path of using assessment data to improve quality.

Keywords: Curriculum Development; Ensuring Consistency of Learning Outcomes; Impediments to implementation; Case study on implementation.

INTRODUCTION

All educational institutions that are committed to pursuing excellence in imparting higher education to their students are grappling with the reality of ensuring consistency across curriculum. Such consistency is most sought in the learning outcomes demonstrated by students. However, the path to achieving and ensuring consistency of learning outcomes in multiple courses of a given program is rife with land mines of consistent academic rigor, consistent pedagogical approaches, consistent teaching and learning material, and consistent measurable learning objectives. All of these are to be achieved while assuring the faculty participants of their academic freedom and allowing them the opportunity to leverage their individual pedagogical strengths and styles. And, of course, the foundational tenet of collegiality is to be protected in order for community to foster among colleagues. The conflicting objectives and goals of the task at hand seem daunting. The frequent "friendly" conflict between administrators and faculty turn contentious when the sacred cow of consistency across curriculum is explored. This research is the attempt of a faculty and an experienced administrator to jointly examine the issue of consistency across curriculum from varying perspectives.

We begin with a conceptual understanding of the reasons for ensuring consistency of curriculum. At the abstract level we draw from literature in education that addresses student concerns, learning expectations of the industry, assessment standards, and the educational institution's perspective. We enrich our narrative with a case study of our experiences with the implementation of a process to build consistency of curriculum and learning outcomes in our school of business. This paper concludes with some normative strategic recommendations based on our learning from the process.

EXCELLENCE IN INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Pursuing high levels of excellence in institutions of higher education has been a sacred tradition since time immemorial. However, recent developments in the demands placed by varying constituents of the learning process have made us examine this tradition more formally and rededicate ourselves to the goal of achieving higher standards. Let us examine some of the factors that are driving our stakeholders to be even more demanding of the learning imparted.

Student Concerns

A lethargic job market and ever increasing costs of attaining college education have made our students more desirous of better learning, superior technology, better facilities, and courses that impart learning that is easily transferable to work environments. Business graduates can expect about 25% higher salaries than other graduates, Graduate Management Admissions Council reported in May 2007. Such a promise is predicated on the fact that industry employers are looking for graduates that demonstrate superior learning in innovation, knowledge, and skills (GMAC 2007). Student expectations are driven by their own needs and perceived needs of potential employers.

Students are demanding far more practical and application driven learning that uses critical thinking components as their cornerstone (Kelly et al 1998). With increased emphasis on globalization, students expect cross-cultural learning based on their experiences of studying and traveling abroad. The fast paced world of TV and video games that our students have fed upon in their formative years now lead them to expect fast paced and entertaining learning experiences (Smart et al 1999). When we couple these observations from prior research with a growing perception of the failure of public school system in preparing for a college education (Buzzel and Sisodia 1997), we indeed are faced with an added responsibility and challenge to meet these new and evolving demands of our most important constituents – the students.

Industry Expectations

More and more companies are seeking potential employees with higher order learning skills of synthesis and application. A critical thinking individual is seen as an ideal candidate for the demands of cross-functional mobility and value adding (Borin and Watkins 1998, Gupta et al 2007). All employees of a firm are viewed as resources that are flexible in their ability to adapt and contribute in a variety of settings offered in a modern corporation. In a special report devoted to trends in career management published in The Wall Street Journal (March 29, 2004) we witness the changing expectations of corporate America and ensuing changes in perspectives of their employees from three different generations. The demands of skill sets expected by firms today is quite different from those expected a decade ago, similarly the employees are modifying their definitions of loyalty and commitment in favor of variety seeking behavior both within and across organizations. To complicate the matters even further, most employers prefer graduates with highly focused (and therefore narrow) specialization and then lament at the lack of broader leadership qualities in their new hires (Gupta et al 2007). The students, consequently, desire a more focused specialization for the immediate gratification of potential employers – often a myopic stance in the long term.

In a recent report, the Wall Street Journal pointed out other recent trends that have implications for enhanced rigor and consistency in curriculum. More and more firms seem to demand customized programs for their current and future employees (Alsop 2007a and b). The companies that seek specialized programs are now imposing yet another standard of ROI in terms of learning per Dollar expended. Companies engaged in such customized programs are further delineating their own customized learning goals and resultant curriculum. In post 9/11 era, the Federal Government has sought and successfully received tailor-made strategy training programs – their expectations and needs are different from corporate employers. The challenge then is to ensure consistency of learning outcomes across the variety of program delivery and expectations.

These trends present institutions of higher education with a refreshed agenda of educational learning provided to their graduates.

Accreditation Criteria

Business schools are increasingly attempting to attain accreditation by The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB International) as a way of communicating to diverse constituents that the school meets demanding and relevant standards of quality. The accreditation bodies in the US are influenced by the directives of the US Department of Education to measure and assure learning outcomes. Assurance of learning standards require that schools define challenging and relevant learning expectations (outcomes) and that processes are utilized by faculty to assess student achievement of expectations (AACSB 2007). In the previous decade, it was deemed adequate for an administrative report to demonstrate currency and effectiveness of a program by compiling a matrix or perhaps conducting a brief survey. In the present set of standards, assessment processes are expected to provide real data that demonstrates the attainment (or lack thereof) of stated objectives related to both managerial knowledge and skills, and that this data is utilized for the purpose of ongoing quality improvement (Pokharel 2007, Martell 2007). Processes must provide evidence of consistency across the curriculum, especially in instances of multiple sections of the same course taught by different professors, whether full-time or part time. The accreditation process provides new opportunities and challenges to define and measure quality in ways that may not be consistent with the level of freedom typically enjoyed by school faculty. Outcomes may need to be defined at the course, major, and degree program levels. Assessment mechanisms must be designed and implemented. Feedback must be documented, analyzed, and used to improve programs. New approaches must be utilized to enhance collaboration, resolve differences, and work toward greater consistency in expectations, assessment methodologies, and outcomes. We will no longer be able to simply *assume* the mission objectives are accomplished. In the new accreditation environment, stakeholders will demand tangible evidence that objectives are consistently attained across the curriculum.

Faculty Considerations

As we discuss these issues in the hallways of our institutions, the recurring thoughts of faculty revolve around some foundational issues that need to be addressed. We often bemoan the erosion of educational goals in our institutions largely viewing their students as their "customers". In its most basic (and often misunderstood) manifestation such a perspective leads us to question the notion of pandering to our customers and their families. We also then move into the ever-troubling realm of student evaluation of teaching where such evaluations are often viewed as popularity contests rather than an evaluation of true learning. A faculty is often torn between balancing the two: customer satisfaction and learning. The results are devastating to the learning experience, for instance grade inflation and lack of rigor are natural outcomes. The situation is further exacerbated by our shrinking budgets being labeled as "tuition driven."

While we paint a dismal picture, it is easy to see the logical flaw in the reasoning. Perhaps, viewing our students as the product of their learning experience and viewing our professional peers at graduate schools (and within corporations) as our true customers could lead to a possible solution. We then become beholden to our vocation as teachers and profession as business practitioners to produce a product that is worthy of being absorbed in the operation of business world.

SUCCESSFUL MODEL: A CASE STUDY

We are aware that of all organizations, institutions of higher education are among the slowest to adapt and change to meet the demands of their constituents (Guskin 1996, Peach et al 2007). Change is often perceived as a threat in academia, because traditions and philosophies that have survived the test of time over centuries are hard to change; their very existence for extended period is seen as a sign of strength. It is a tautological argument to use the existence of a construct as evidence of its necessity, yet we in academia often shut our eyes to changing demands around us and hope that they will pass. Research documents that proposed changes in organizations devoted to higher education face a mortality rate in excess of two-thirds of the time they are undertaken (Beer and Nohria 2000).

The best way to achieve success in implementing a model of consistency across curriculum is largely dependent on faculty cooperation and support (Peach et al 2007, Weinstein and Barrett 2007, Rouse 2006). The focus of such change should be transformational change that leads to superior education for our students, rather than a transactional change to merely meet and bureaucratic requirement. The first step, and perhaps the most critical one, would be to establish a *need* for adopting a model that ensures academic rigor and consitency of content in curriculum.

We believe that getting our colleagues to agree on need for change is half the battle won. It is important that our faculty colleagues understand and agree with a shift in paradigm due to evolving demands of our constituents. It is then also of paramount importance that the channels of communication are established and remain open for input and feedback. Cooperation and trust are foundational to aligning conflicting goals of all faculty participants. We also have found that celebrating minor victories on a periodic basis leads to achieving greater successes. We suggest that short-term goals be established in order to achieve long-term results. An overnight change in balancing academic freedom with conformity of learning objectives is both unrealistic and unattainable.

There are alternative approaches that can be utilized to assure that students achieve learning expectations. We made a decision early in the quality improvement process to focus on course-embedded measurement. Our intent was to establish learning objectives and assess outcomes in each required course within majors and the School core curriculum. In order to attain faculty interest, involvement, and commitment to the quality improvement program, we utilized the following sequential process:

1. Creation of course guides for all required courses

   For each required course in our curriculum, a team of faculty was assigned the task of creating a "course guide". The fundamental intent of a course guide is to address consistency issues among multiple sections of the same course. Individual faculty were to be encouraged to utilize these guides as a template when developing individual course syllabi. If properly utilized, the guides would be a significant step forward in initiating a process that will lead to more consistent objectives, methodologies, and assessment across multiple sections of required courses. The most important components of the guides were specific, assessable learning outcomes; recommended teaching methodologies; and recommended assessment measures and techniques. Other components included course description, course outline of content, statement of expectations, prerequisite knowledge and skills, and methods for providing assessment feedback.

   Creation of the course guides was a stimulating and creative process that encouraged the application of faculty expertise and experience. The most significant concern, anticipated and realized, was that faculty would feel the guides infringed on academic freedom and would create unwanted constraints on individual faculty behavior. Concerns were addressed by providing frequent reminders that the course guide process was owned by teaching faculty and was evolutionary in nature. Faculty must feel encouraged to work collaboratively each year to revise and improve the guides, based on learning experiences from the prior academic year.

2. Development of syllabi based on course guides

   The course guides were utilized as a template by some faculty when designing course and section-specific syllabi. Faculty were encouraged to create syllabi that reflected personal strengths and preferences, but that were *reasonably* consistent with course guide expectations. The need for consistency was emphasized related to content, expectations, and learning objectives, with relatively more freedom in determining teaching and assessment methodologies. Fear of being coerced into conformance with the course guide, particularly recommended teaching methodologies, was a significant issue. Resistance was addressed by communicating the need for consistency among sections (driven by internal and external factors as discussed previously) and by clearly stating that there would be expected variability among syllabi to account for individual preferences and expectations.

3. Implementation of course syllabi and collection of assessment data

Once linked to course guides, faculty members implemented syllabi in a normal fashion throughout the academic semester. A significant change (for some faculty) was the expectation that assessment data collected throughout the semester must be related to specific learning objectives. For example, if learning objectives were established for written communication skill and the application of theory to decision making, then assessment data should be collected separately for each objective. At the end of the semester, professors were expected to compile individual summary reports of assessment results related specifically to each learning objective. It was critical to emphasize that these reports were not assessment of professor performance, but were necessary inputs for the quality improvement process. Professors had to be convinced that it was acceptable to conclude that specific learning outcomes had not been attained. These conclusions could then be analyzed to identify underlying causes and appropriate strategies for improvement in the next semester.

4. End of semester collaborative meeting

Professors teaching multiple sections of the same course met after the conclusion of the semester to present individual assessment results, to discuss underlying causes of successes and failures, and to collaboratively plan improvement strategies. Our early experience is that these meetings were very productive and rewarding. For the first time, professors were actually sharing techniques, actual results, analysis of real assessment data, and improvement strategies. These discussions were the most critical component of the process to more consistently deliver the attainment of learning expectations.

5. Sharing of results with the School

Faculty who prepared assessment reports were encouraged to share this information with peers at a school of business meeting. It is at this step in the process when fear of "professor evaluation" rather than "program evaluation" is overcome. Professors honestly and openly shared successes and failures without fear of criticism and retribution. At this point in the process, culture began to change. With faculty leadership, values and attitudes toward assessment shifted to an emphasis on continuous quality improvement of the program instead of a feared form of post tenure review. When done with professionalism, humility, and a good sense of humor, the community discussion of assessment results created a dynamic that energized many of the faculty. The critical "closing the loop" suggested by AACSB can be achieved with ease and grace when approached with collegiality and the basic understanding that closing the loop is a matter of faculty commitment to excellence in their vocation rather than a need to comply.

6. Documentation of results

Although quality improvement is (and should be) an end in itself, it is important to go back to the situational variables that have motivated this process. Various constituencies expect (and demand) to see real processes and data that support our claims of high quality. Each of the previous steps in the process had to be carefully documented and made available to stakeholder groups. Care has to be taken that documentation does not become overly cumbersome, and that one is particularly sensitive to compiling unnecessary administrative reports. But the genesis of our efforts to attain academic excellence is not totally self-motivated. We no longer have the luxury of convincing ourselves that we are doing an excellent job. In the new academic environment, we must be prepared to prove that our mission statement, with its declarations of differentiation and excellence, is more than a nice intention.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Based on our initial experience with trying to utilize assessment processes to increase consistency across the curriculum, we offer the following general recommendations to our peers who aspire to travel down the same path.

1. Many faculty are reluctant to change the status quo and feel threatened by "quality improvement programs". Faculty must be engaged in a discussion of changing constituent expectations and the need to document learning outcomes to satisfy those expectations.
2. In order to improve quality, a systematic assessment process is essential to determine the quality level of current programs. This must entail the development of specific learning outcomes and the collection and analysis of data to determine if those objectives are being attained. This must be accomplished if the school intends to attain (or maintain) accreditation.
3. A course-embedded approach to assessment will get many faculty involved in the hands-on process of collecting and analyzing assessment data, and can lead to productive discussions that will improve consistency across multiple sections of common courses.
4. The creative development of course guides provide a reasonable starting point in the process. Faculty teams work to define specific and assessable learning outcomes for each course, and recommend appropriate teaching and assessment methodologies. Course guides can then be utilized as templates for all faculty (full and part-time) to design syllabi that are reasonably consistent in terms of content and rigor.
5. As courses progress following the syllabi of individual professors, data must be collected that relate to the level of attainment of each learning objective. The collection of objective-specific data may require modifications to assessment techniques that have been traditionally utilized to evaluate student performance.
6. Individual professors should be expected to compile end-of-semester assessment reports that relate performance data to specific learning outcomes. The analysis of this data should lead to the identification of underlying causes of performance problems and to the creation of improvement strategies.
7. These reports should be shared with other faculty teaching the same course, and with the business school faculty at large. The open and honest sharing of assessment data, and the discussion of underlying problems and improvement strategies, can have a significant impact on the culture of the school. It can be demonstrated that assessment processes are focused on program, not professor, assessment.
8. The assessment process must be viewed as a long-term evolutionary one. All aspects of the process must be flexible to take advantage of institutional learning.

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