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Curriculum Revision Considerations: The Voice of Experience

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ABSTRACT

Curriculum revision is one of the most daunting challenges facing faculty. The process is full of pitfalls and hurdles. However, these problems can be overcome. In the following discussion, the ten things that must be considered are listed and evaluated. Although many of the factors appear to be self-evident, programs often find them to be insurmountable hurdles. The paper discusses such potential problems as faculty involvement, planning activities, resources, and stakeholder considerations. By keeping these warnings in mind, a curriculum revision can be a rewarding and productive endeavor.

Introduction

A curriculum revision is one of the most daunting challenges facing faculty. The process is full of pitfalls and hurdles. However, these problems can be overcome. In the following discussion, the ten things that must be considered are listed and evaluated.

East Tennessee State University (ETSU) began a Master of Business Administration (MBA) program review in 2004. The existing program had been in effect since 1991, at which time it was considered a state-of-the-art program. However, in the intervening years, changes in the environment indicated changes in the program needed to be addressed.

The curriculum consisted of 13 courses (39 credit hours), many of which were team-taught by cross-functional faculty, and the program was a general business degree with no options to specialize. Also, competitive programs in the local area and on-line were infringing on the traditional market for ETSU's MBA program. Potential students were requesting a shorter program and a program with specializations. The faculty were no longer team-teaching the courses, so the cross-functional aspect of the curriculum was lost. As a result, a committee was appointed, by the Dean, to study the current MBA program and to determine if there were ways to address the problems.

As the committee worked through the three-year process of reviewing and revising the MBA program, a number of hurdles were encountered and overcome.

The following discussion includes a number of lessons the committee learned.

Number 1:
Involve faculty in the revision discussion.

The faculty of the program have valuable information about the program. For example, they know the type of students in the program and their learning abilities. Faculty also know the course content and, in many cases, know the weaknesses of the courses. Their input into the process of curriculum revision is very valuable, but many of them may be resistant to change – especially when they feel "their course" is threatened.

Leaving faculty out of the curriculum revision process invites resistance to the proposed changes. When the University of Wisconsin – Madison redesigned its MBA program, Dean Michael Knetter determined to allow the entire faculty to be involved in the process. He stated "Every dean will have a strong view of what should happen in a curriculum redesign. It's better, however, to provide the information and resources faculty need to make good decisions…." (Bisoux 2005)

The University of South Alabama College of Nursing addressed the problem of faculty resistance to change through the use of the Nominal Group Technique. A faculty retreat was held, and the participants were asked to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the current undergraduate nursing program. This approach led to faculty involvement

in the curriculum process and enthusiasm for the resulting program. (Davis, et. al. 1998)

ETSU invited faculty from all disciplines to be a part of the MBA Committee. Over the three years, membership of the committee changed as faculty left the university or resigned from the committee due to lack of interest. Those faculty members who remained on the committee were dedicated to creating the best possible MBA program the university could offer. The changes made to the program came from the faculty on the committee and from other faculty who provided input through e-mail and open faculty discussions held throughout the three years. As a result, the new MBA program is a product of the faculty – not the administration – and there was unanimous approval of the revision.

Number 2:
Consider why a change is necessary.

There are many reasons why a curriculum may need to be revised. Changes in resources, changes in the material covered, and changes in faculty are just a few of the causes of need to revise a curriculum. However, consideration must be given to changes other than curriculum changes that could fix problems within a program. The first steps taken by ETSU's MBA Committee was to determine why the program needed to change. Data collected by the committee indicated that constituents perceived some strengths and weaknesses in the program, and the committee then addressed the weaknesses identified, while retaining the indicated strengths.

As a result, a number of courses were retained, some were eliminated, and some new courses were added. In keeping with the idea that students need to build their skills from one course to another, the sequencing of the courses was planned so that material learned in one course could be applied in the following courses, i.e., statistics should be one of the first courses taken so that the material could be applied in the Operations and Technology Strategy course, the Marketing Strategy course, and the Culminating Experience course.

Number 3:
Have a plan.

When the decision has been made to consider curriculum revision, a plan must be formulated and the goals of the revision must be stated. The first step is to decide who is going to oversee the revision. When ETSU decided to review its current Master of Business Administration program, the Associate Dean for Graduate Studies was designated the as person to supervise the review. Then a cross-functional, volunteer faculty committee was formed. The committee decided the first step was to gather information.

Surveys were designed and distributed to students, alumni, faculty, employers, and the college Board of Advisors. Also, a benchmarking study was conducted to determine how the ETUS MBA program stacked up relative to other MBA programs. The data from these sources established that a revision of the MBA program was necessary, so the committee commenced the revision process.

Once a determination to revise a program has been made, an agreement as to the goals of the revision must be determined. The ETSU committee decided to reduce the number of hours in the curriculum, include concentrations in the curriculum, eliminated team-taught courses, and update the content of the curriculum.

Number 4:
Consider stakeholders.

Stakeholders are an important source of information about the needs of a program. Students, alumni, faculty, and employers should be allowed to provide their insights into the needs of the program. Figure 1 illustrates the various stakeholders who provide inputs to a curriculum revision. When ETSU was considering a revision of the MBA program, surveys were conducted soliciting information from students, alumni, faculty, the Board of Advisors, and employers. The data from the survey indicated changes needed to be made in the length of the program, the availability of concentrations, and the content of the program. For example, the survey results of the alumni and faculty of ETSU indicated the Research Methods and Statistics course contained too much material on research methods and not enough material on statistics. The result of this weakness was the modification of the course; however, the entire curriculum did not need to be revised.

Other stakeholders also need to be considered. For example, the University of Arkansas at Fort Smith (UAFS) undertook a zero-based undergraduate curriculum revision that resulted in an innovative and creative approach. However, the proposed curriculum did not take into consideration the needs of the transfers from two-year feeder schools. As a result,

the proposed curriculum was modified to allow students to transfer most of their previous courses into the UAFS program. (Hale and Tanner 2006)

One of the weaknesses identified by employers, alumni, and students was the lack of a student's ability to specialize in a functional area. Therefore, concentrations were added to the program. Another weakness identified by the stakeholders was the length of the program. The consensus appeared to be that the program should be able to be completed in a maximum of four semesters. As a result, the committee determined that the maximum number of credit hours for the MBA program should be thirty-six. Other weaknesses discussed in the surveys were related to specific courses and the content of the courses. Those areas were addressed through the content revisions of the courses.

sociation of Schools and Colleges (SACS), and the Tennessee Board of Regents.

The AACSB Eligibility Procedures and Accreditation Standards for Business Accreditation states in Standard 18 that MBA programs should contain elements that provide students with the following: (1) Capacity to lead in organizational situations, (2) Capacity to apply knowledge in new and unfamiliar circumstances through a conceptual understanding of relevant disciplines, and (3) Capacity to adapt and innovate to solve problems, to cope with unforeseen events, and to manage in unpredictable environments. (AACSB 2007) This standard resulted in the design of an added course to the MBA curriculum entitled "Strategic Leadership."

The Commission on Colleges of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools states in section

FIGURE 1
INPUTS REGARDING PROGRAM
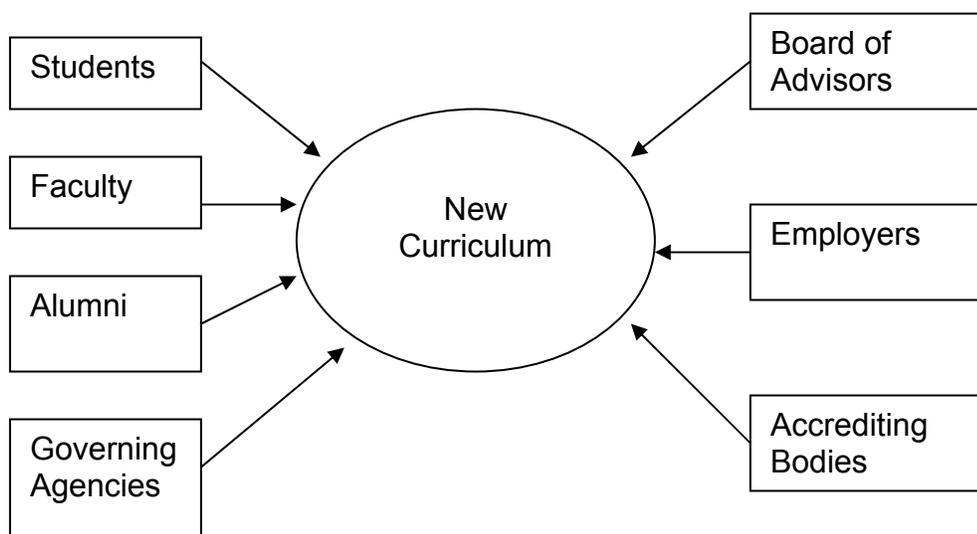
Number 5:
Consider accreditation agencies' and governmental requirements.

When revising a program, consideration must be given to the guidelines provided by accrediting agencies. For example, when revising the MBA program at ETSU, three agencies' criteria were considered: the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business International (AACSB), the Southern As-

3.6.2 of Principles of Accreditation: Foundations for Quality Enhancement that "The institution structures its graduate curricula … to ensure ongoing student engagement in research and/or appropriate professional practice and training experiences." (COCSACS 2006) As a result, the current experiential learning course, "Strategic Experience," was retained in the revised curriculum.

The Tennessee Board of Regents is the state governmental agency to whom ETSU reports. TBR Policy 2:01:01:00 addresses the approval process for academic programs, and states that substantive revision of existing academic programs must be approved first by the institution, then by TBR, and then by the Tennessee Higher Education Commission. (TBR 2006) With these steps in mind, the committee delegated specific individuals to complete the necessary forms for the approvals.

It is interesting to note that the stakeholders providing inputs into a curriculum (see Figure 1) are not, with the exception of the faculty, involved in the curriculum approval process. Figure 2 illustrates the approval process for a curriculum revision.

Number 6:
Consider what other programs are doing.

Other programs have gone through a curriculum revision, so it is important to gather information about other similar programs. When ETSU was considering a revision in its Master of Business Administration (MBA) program, one of the first steps was to conduct a benchmarking study of peer programs, competitor programs, and aspirant programs. Information was collected as to the requirements for foundation courses, number of credit hours needed for completion of the program, course content of the program, and admission standards. The study highlighted the strengths and weakness of the ETSU program, and gave the committee a starting point for discussion.

Number 7:
Consider the resources available.

One of the weaknesses in the ETSU MBA program was the lack of resources to offer team-taught courses. Many of the courses in the existing MBA program were cross-functional courses that required two faculty members to effectively teach the content of the course. With the turnover in faculty and the lack of financial resources to fund two faculty members per course, these cross-functional courses were not longer feasible. On the other hand, one of the strengths of the program was the availability of other resources, i.e., technological resources and financial support for release time to develop new courses.

Number 8
Consider assurance of learning goals.

As the courses were developed in the MBA program, the committee concurrently addressed the assurance of learning goals for the program. Rubrics were written, and decisions were made as to the courses in which the rubrics should be used. Doing the curriculum revision and addressing the assurance of learning at the same time facilitated the direction of both processes. The AACSB International accreditation standard number 15 states, "The school uses well documented, systematic processes to develop, monitor, evaluate, and revise the substance and delivery of the curricula of degree programs, and toe assess the impact of curricula on learning." (AACSB 2007) Following this statement, the standard lists areas of knowledge and skills that business programs, undergraduate and graduate, should contain. The committee used these two pieces of information to create a comprehensive curriculum and imbed assurance of learning goals and measurement within the revised courses.

Number 9
Consider compromise.

Every member of the faculty will have his or her concept of the ideal program. Unfortunately, each of these concepts differs. In order for a curriculum revision to succeed, many compromises must be made. In limiting the number of courses required for an MBA degree, not all areas identified by the faculty can be included in the program. As a result, negotiation must occur. The original goal of the revised MBA was to have a project management focus. However, as the committee studied the competencies needed by MBA graduates, it became clear that the project management focus was not realistic. As a compromise, a concentration in Project Management was added to the curriculum.

Number 10
Remember it will change.

Bisoux (2005) stated, ". . . perhaps the most significant characteristic" of the new MBA programs is that they are in a constant state of revision. One of the factors considered in the revision of ETSU' MBA program was the ability to revise the program easily in future as the environment changes. Courses were given generic titles, i.e., Economics for Managers and Accounting Information for Decision Makers, so that the content of the courses could

be revised without having to undergo another curriculum revision.

By keeping these warnings in mind, a curriculum revision can be a rewarding and productive endeavor. A new curriculum can meet the needs of a program's graduates. The change in the curriculum can bring added enthusiasm to the faculty, and a new approach can address employers' needs.

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