

EVOLUTION OF AN ASSESSMENT PROCESS: ASSESSING A COLLEGE OF BUSINESS UNDERGRADUATE CORE CURRICULUM

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the process and instruments used to assess the undergraduate business core. In the College of Business Administration the process and instruments have been revised several times over the past few years. It began with assessing one core competency with one instrument. We now assess ten core competencies with multiple tools. Each year a College assessment committee establishes goals for itself, evaluates the accomplishments of the committee, and revises the assessment process and tools used based upon what was learned.

INTRODUCTION

Faculty members impact students in many ways. They provide academic and career advising, offer guidance to student organizations, and design academic programs. All of these are done with the hopes that students will learn and grow professionally and personally from these activities. Diamond (1998) says that few activities will have greater impact on students than the design of curriculum. “As a direct result of these efforts (design of a curriculum or a course), learning can be facilitated, and your students’ attitudes toward their own abilities can be significantly enhanced; they will be better prepared for the challenges they will face after graduation” (p. 1).

Faculty members routinely assess their courses and programs and redesign them to make them a better course or program. For example, as faculty try a new assignment, and find that it does not achieve the intended results from the students, they revise the assignment. As trends in business change, programs are redesigned to reflect the latest trends. As technology changes, curriculum is adjusted to better prepare students in the latest technology and management of it.

While faculty members naturally assessed their courses and programs, many assessment efforts were not systematic. Currently, assessment efforts are designed to be systematic approaches to continuous improvement of the curriculum. Diamond (1998) says that “the needs for instructional improvement are too great and resources are too limited to allow us to be inefficient or ineffective in the way we address our curricular problems. We cannot afford to leave things to chance, hoping that the right question will be asked, the key people will be involved, and all the appropriate options will be explored” (p. 15).

This paper describes the process and instruments used to assess the undergraduate business core. As Astin (1992) recommends, “improvement is best fostered when assessment entails a linked series of activities undertaken over time” (p. 2). In the College of Business Administration the process and instruments have been revised several times over the past few years. It began with assessing one core competency with one instrument. We now assess ten core competencies with multiple tools. Each year a College assessment committee establishes goals for itself, evaluates the accomplishments of the committee, and revises the assessment process and tools used based upon what was learned.

FINDING A PLACE TO START: THE UNDERGRADUATE CORE CURRICULUM

In the 1996-97 academic year faculty in the College of Business decided to design a systematic methodology to assess the undergraduate core curriculum. The core curriculum consists of 14 courses that all business students take. It includes the areas of accounting, computer information systems management, economics, finance, management, marketing, microcomputing, operations management, organizational behavior, statistics, and strategic management. To begin with, the faculty decided to develop ten competencies that they hoped a student who completed the core would be to demonstrate accomplishment.

With the support of the Dean of the College of Business Administration (CBA), a committee was created to assess the CBA undergraduate business core and establish an assessment framework.

Beginning with the Ten Core Competencies

The faculty defined ten business competencies which they felt were the core of a business education: written and oral communication skills, motivation and working under pressure skills, leadership skills, teamwork and people skills, critical thinking skills, creativity skills, ethical decision making skills, technical skills, global awareness skills, and business integration skills. The competencies were derived from our CBA mission statement, and confirmed with our faculty, students (revalidated by a Basic Business Competencies Survey sent to graduating students) and CBA Executive Advisory Board. After consulting with several colleagues with experience in the field of assessment, attending a conference, and reading assessment literature, the faculty scaled down their effort to focus on one competency. The competency chosen was technical skills.

The objectives of the first year of the assessment plan were to define technical skills, evaluate the competency of the CBA students in technical skills, and involve CBA faculty in curriculum improvement if necessary. Once piloted, the assessment process could be used as a model for evaluating the other CBA core competencies. The expected outcome of this first assessment effort was a framework to use to evaluate, at various stages of the curriculum, how well students achieve the business core competencies through the undergraduate core. The committee believed that the framework could be useful to other schools and colleges on campus as well.

Designing the First Assessment Instrument

The committee surveyed all CBA faculty to develop a definition of technical skills, identified the specific technical skills necessary for completing their courses, and determine at what level those technical skills should be attained (i.e., freshman, sophomore, junior, senior). Once the committee obtained agreement on the definition of technical skills, they interviewed key faculty members who teach CBA core courses to identify specific learning objectives and performance measurements for technical skills. For example, "by the end of the junior year the student will be able to use a spreadsheet to obtain a forecast for the demand of a product using the method of exponential smoothing." Once the committee developed the learning objectives, they designed an objective examination to assess the level of competence in technical skills.

The committee expected that this assessment of technical skills would assist the CBA in its improvement of curriculum specifically in the core courses. Since this was the first attempt by the

College to do this type of assessment, the establishment of an undergraduate business core assessment framework or model was critical in conducting future evaluations of CBA core competencies.

Ultimately, the committee believed this model and the assessment information would help them determine whether students were learning the objectives developed from the College mission statement and better advise students on careers in business.

The committee felt that all of this would impact the content of what is taught within the CBA core courses. Over time it would allow the College to modify, consolidate, and improve specific business core courses.

Piloting the First Assessment Instruments

As a result of interviewing key faculty who taught CBA core courses, ten specific technical skills were identified. The skills were: choosing appropriate hardware and software, and being able to use word processing, spreadsheets, databases, presentation tools, email, Internet, teleconferencing and groupware.

Two methods of student competency assessment were designed. One was a paper and pencil pre-post self-assessment of confidence in the use of the identified information technology skills and their understanding of the concepts by students enrolled in the required informational technology core course. The second assessment tool was a pilot hands-on skills test using two levels of skills. Both were case study assignments, the first required only basic skills while the second included some additional problem solving abilities.

The pre-post self-assessment was a one-page document given to the students during the first week of classes. The same document was given to the students the eighth week of classes. There were statistically significant positive changes in students' self-confidence levels in their being able to use the information technology on all ten items at the end of the core course.

The hands on skills test required the student to use word processing, spreadsheet, email, attachments to email, and Internet capabilities. Ten students signed up for the test, but only three actually took the test.

Findings and Recommendations from the First Assessment Instruments

The committee found the pre-post self-assessment of confidence in use of information technology skills to be useful to determine the students' perception of their confidence. It was useful to know that the students perceived a change in themselves at the end of the core course. How long the confidence lasts was another question. The committee also would need to determine if these skills are actual or perceived.

The committee found that they needed to make the hands-on case problem easier to administer. It should be embedded in courses and made part of the flow of the course itself.

The committee found the initial model of developing and administering the assessment instruments for the first competency, information technology skills, to be adequate, but they recommended a number of things to do differently in the future.

1. When establishing a working definition of the skill being assessed interview key faculty teaching core courses first and then forward the definition to the whole faculty for agreement on the definition.
2. When interviewing the faculty, interview more than one person who teaches the course and then meet with several or all those teaching the course to confirm or disconfirm interview findings.
3. Involve appropriate faculty in the design of objective measures. They may have something they use in their courses, which is applicable to other core courses as well. Also design more than one objective measure to be able to approach the competency from various angles.
4. When implementing the assessment instruments pilot test them in courses rather than as a requirement that is not part of a course. Embedding the process in the natural flow of the course is recommended.
5. Keep the faculty involved so that they can use the results. Key faculty, such as those on curriculum committees or course design task forces, are critical. Each faculty member who participated in the assessment process should receive feedback on the results as soon as possible. Listen to all faculty. Even the ones who appear hostile to the process can have something that can be of value.
6. Keep the set of competencies up to date.
7. One faculty member should take the lead role in the process. A focus person can facilitate the process and help keep things together and moving.

Developing the Ten Core Competencies

After the initial pilot assessment of information technology skills, the College was ready to begin the process of assessing the remaining nine competencies. During the next academic year, the committee conducted faculty focus group sessions on the remaining nine competencies to reach a consensus on the definitions and on operationalizing the definitions. Eight of the nine competency definitions were modified based upon the focus group session feedback. The tenth competency still required more discussion.

The committee also distributed curriculum maps to the curriculum committee members to gather data on the coverage of core competencies in the business core courses.

The committee developed measurement instruments for seven of the nine competencies based upon feedback from the focus group sessions. They used a case to assess skill level in the seven competencies. The committee then assessed incoming and outgoing business students on eight core competencies, using six faculty graders.

The committee met regularly with the CBA Curriculum Committee to solicit ideas and support for assessment and to assure that the outcomes of the assessment activities led to curriculum improvement.

LESSONS LEARNED

The committee found this next step to be a learning process as well. Lessons learned were:

1. Emphasis should be on the program as whole rather than individual courses.
2. Curriculum assessment and curriculum development are mutually dependent.
3. Assessment can be integrated into the curriculum. It is not an “add on” for either students or faculty.

4. Ensure continuity.
5. Keep it simple.
6. Use multiple forms of assessment over several years.
7. Look for support from institutional assessment.
8. Communicate and involve faculty.

GOING FROM THE IDEAL TO THE REALISTIC

The case study used to assess students on the core competencies was a well thought out and designed, comprehensive case study. In a perfect world, this was the ideal assessment instrument. The committee found, however, that the case study was not practical to administer for two reasons.

The first difficulty the committee found with the case study was that faculty commitment was uneven and often unpredictable when it came to administering the case in their classes. Some faculty were more than willing to allow the case to be given in their classes, others were not. Some faculty said they would allow the case to be administered in their classes and then backed out at the last minute.

The second difficulty the committee found was in evaluating the case study. It was extremely time intensive and was often difficult to find faculty to evaluate the cases.

As a result, the committee decided that a less than ideal, but more practical instrument needed to be developed. While the new instrument was less than ideal, a simpler version hopefully would mean more participation by both students and faculty.

A multiple-choice instrument was designed to measure the core competencies. It has just recently been piloted and the committee will be analyzing the results shortly.

CONTINUALLY LEARNING FROM THE EXPERIENCE

The faculty of the College continue to learn from the assessment process. The advice given early on in the initial phase to start small and keep it simple is still good advice. Assessment is an ongoing process and if too much is taken on at any stage, the process may become so difficult that it may be dropped.

Another lesson learned was to involve as many faculty as possible. The committee involved faculty at different stages, but it still was not enough. The faculty as a whole needs to be involved continually throughout the process in order for them to believe in assessment, support the process, and most important be able to use the results of the assessment to continually improve academic programs. Emphasis on the program as a whole rather than individual courses is vital. Key faculty, such as those on curriculum committees or course design task forces, are critical. All faculty members should receive feedback on the results as soon as possible. And finally listen to all faculty. Even the ones who appear hostile to the process can have something that can be of value.

When implementing the assessment instruments, embed them in courses so assessment is not an add on for the faculty and students. The assessment process should be in the natural flow of the course in which it is administered. When the committee tried to give exams which were not a part of the requirements of the course, they found it difficult to find meaningful participation from the students and faculty.

Keep the set of competencies up to date, but at a reasonable pace. Once the working definitions for the ten core competencies was established, the committee did not change them in any way. The committee felt that they wanted to develop instruments and pilot them before they began to change the list of competencies and their definitions. Now that the committee has gone through several iterations of the assessment process and instruments, they find this would be a good time to review the competencies with the faculty to see if the list and definitions is still valid.

The committee has taken to heart their findings that multiple forms of assessment over several years is best. As a result several assessment tools are in the final or pilot stages. They are: multiple-choice core competency exam given to students in capstone courses; core competency assessment survey mailed to all graduating students; student satisfaction, on-line survey given to all students in capstone courses; and an alumni student satisfaction and core competency on-line survey.

The committee also found it desirable to establish a comprehensive assessment plan. They have drafted a five-year assessment plan which includes the development of several instruments including those mentioned above.

And finally the committee continues to find ways to encourage the concept that program assessment and curriculum development are mutually dependent. The committee has spent most of its energy on establishing a workable assessment process and practical assessment instruments, and has not spent as much time on finding ways to ensure program improvement based upon assessment results. This is one key goal for the upcoming year.

REFERENCES

- [1] Astin, W. A. et. al. *Principles of Good Practice for Assessing Student Learning*. AAHE Assessment Forum, 1992.
- [2] Diamond, R. M. *Designing and Assessing Courses and Curricula*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998.