

# **ANALYSIS OF ASSURANCE OF LEARNING (AOL) UTILIZING AN ORGANIZATIONAL THEORY PERSPECTIVE**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper presents a conceptual and theoretical analysis of AACSB Assurance of Learning (AOL) processes through an organizational theory perspective. Because AOL processes demand high levels of collaboration and coordination across functional specializations, organizational theory constructs are appropriate to facilitate enhanced levels of cooperation, coordination, collaboration, and control in order to attain both efficiency and effectiveness in AOL processes.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Colleges of business seeking to obtain or retain AACSB accreditation must impart to their students a combination of management-specific knowledge (e.g., marketing, accounting, finance, management, and so on) as well as teaching students other skill areas that cross these functional disciplines [1]. Examples of skill areas include communication abilities, ethical awareness, problem solving, global awareness, and team skills, to name a few. This paper examines the applicability of organizational theory constructs that can enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of AOL processes in colleges of business. As noted recently by Greenwood and Miller “the study of organization design has been unduly neglected in recent years despite its critical importance for organizational performance” [4, p. 78].

## **FUNCTIONAL ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE**

Organization structure identifies the grouping together of individuals into departments and departments into the college. Structure also designates the formal reporting relationships and number of levels in the hierarchy of authority, as well as the span of control of deans, department chairs, and faculty members. Functional organizational structures place faculty members who bring specialized knowledge and expertise to the organization, and who perform similar or related functions, into a common unit—for example, marketing, finance, or management. The functional structure is most effective when in-depth knowledge or expertise is essential to meeting the organization’s goals. The advantages of functional structure include economies of scale within the function and in-depth knowledge of the faculty members.

However, the disadvantages of a functional structure can include slow response to environmental changes, poor horizontal coordination, and a restricted view of overall organizational goals [3]. In order to overcome challenges of functional structure, many organizations rely on horizontal linkages to improve communication, coordination, and collaboration. Examples of horizontal linkages in a college of business may include an AOL task force or AOL committee. In spite of the horizontal linkages, some resistance to change may be encountered due to faculty members’ loyalty to their respective functions. For example, finance, accounting, or economics professors may feel less compelled to teach communication skills due to the quantitative nature of their functional disciplines. Similarly, some

management professors (e.g., behavioralists) may feel some self-efficacy issues in teaching quantitative problem solving.

### **MATRIX STRUCTURE**

Since AOL processes are critical for attaining or retaining AACSB accreditation, elements of a matrix structure may be beneficial. In a matrix structure, both the functional content areas and the learning goal skills are given equal weight and emphasized simultaneously. The matrix structure is a strong form of horizontal linkage. As Daft [3] points out, a matrix structure is appropriate when the following conditions are present:

1. Pressure exists to share resources across traditional functional lines (e.g., added need for enhancement of student skills).
2. Environmental pressure exists for two or more critical outputs (content knowledge and skills development). This dual pressure means a balance of power is needed between the functional content knowledge and the learning goal skills.
3. External changes (e.g., AACSB accreditation standards) create the need for high interdependence among departments and require an extensive amount of coordination and information processing and exchange.

The strengths of the matrix structure include increased coordination and flexible sharing of faculty members across functions. However, the matrix structure can result in dual lines of authority and can be time consuming in terms of meetings to resolve conflicts. Additionally, the matrix structure requires additional effort to maintain the balance of power [3]. In efforts to produce continuous improvement in both content knowledge and skill areas, some form of conflict is likely inevitable.

### **BUFFERING AND BOUNDARY SPANNING ROLES**

An early work by Thompson [6] proposed that functional areas in organizations often had protection from the external environment through the use of buffering roles. The purpose of buffering roles is to absorb uncertainty from the external environment. A newer approach to dealing with the changing external environment is to drop or remove the buffers and expose the organization's technical/functional core to the external environment so all organizational employees understand the challenge of quicker adaptation [3]. In the past, many college faculty members left the responsibilities for meeting AACSB accreditation responsibilities to the deans and other administrators. However, with new pressures from AACSB to have learning goals and assessment processes fully embedded across the curriculum, these buffers must be dropped. In lieu of buffering roles, colleges of business are moving toward boundary spanning roles. Boundary spanning roles link and coordinate an organization with key elements in the external environment; for example demands from AACSB. Boundary spanning is concerned with the exchange of information to bring new information into the organization and send relevant information out to the external environment that portrays the organization in a favorable light [3] [5]. In the case of AACSB accreditation standards, all faculty members must be involved with assessment and must be able to present evidence that AOL processes within their college is resulting in a favorable impact on student learning. All faculty members must "own" the responsibility.

## **LEARNING ORGANIZATIONS**

External environmental pressures, for example AACSB accreditation requirements and employer demands, have resulted in the need for more organizational adaptability. Many organizations are striving toward becoming learning organizations. Learning organizations promote communication and collaboration so that all organizational members are engaged in identifying and solving problems and organizational improvement [3]. The transformation from strict functional roles to learning organizational roles requires a shift in an organization's culture and this applies to colleges of business as well. AACSB provides numerous seminars annually for faculty members to attend in order to enhance their direct knowledge of AACSB accreditation requirements and AOL processes regarding assessment. In this regard, there is opportunity for colleges of business to use mimetic forces. Mimetic forces are the pressure to copy or model what other similar organizations (other colleges of business) are doing [3]. The literature is abundant with articles concerning AOL and assessment practices, thereby sharing knowledge about what other colleges of business are implementing to improve student learning.

## **INTRAORGANIZATIONAL INTERDEPENDENCIES**

Another organizational theory construct that affects an organization's abilities to adapt to change involves interdependence among functional departments or units, often referred to as intraorganizational interdependencies. Based originally on the work of Thompson [6], the nature of the dependence can affect organizational structure. It can be argued that in years past, colleges of business followed a pooled and/or sequential interdependence. In a pooled interdependence, the work does not flow between departments; rather each functional area works toward the common good of the organization. Pooled interdependence is the lowest form of interdependence among departments. Each functional area contributes its specialized expertise, for example marketing, accounting, management, finance, and so on, and the students graduate with a comprehensive set of knowledge. In a sequential interdependence, each functional area contributes to an identifiable sequence. For example, students must first take principles of accounting and principles of economics before progressing to higher level functional courses. Sequential interdependence is a higher level of interdependence than pooled and requires more extensive planning and scheduling roles [3].

While these pooled and sequential interdependencies remain in terms of content knowledge, the demand of AOL and assessment of skills require the addition of reciprocal interdependence. Mature AOL processes indicate that all faculty members are engaged across the functional curriculum. In a reciprocal interdependence, the output of process A is the input to process B, but the output of process B becomes the input back to process A [3] [6]. For AOL and assessment purposes the reciprocal approach is crucial. Learning goals (skills) are adopted by the faculty in accordance with the college's mission. Faculty members collect samples of student work, commonly referred to as artifacts, for the purpose of assessing student learning. These artifacts are generally reviewed by independent reviewers (other faculty members) who then provide feedback to all faculty members regarding level of performance on the various skills. Faculty members then develop specific interventions for their courses in order to improve student learning and student performance is remeasured. In AOL lingo, this is considered "closing the loop" or "continuous improvement." The process becomes highly reciprocal in comparison to a pooled or sequential interdependence. Reciprocal interdependence requires departments and employees to work together intimately with high levels of coordination [3]. Effective performance of teams involved with high interdependence depends on good communication and close coordination [2].

## INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY FOR COORDINATION AND CONTROL

In order to implement the aspects of organizational theory discussed previously in this paper, mechanisms for measuring coordination and control of the AOL processes must be established. The essence of any continuous improvement effort is consistent monitoring of results and frequent feedback. A method of feedback and control that can facilitate effective and efficient processes for AOL in colleges of business is the executive dashboard. Executive dashboards convey a significant amount of information in an easy-to-interpret format. Executive dashboards have been implemented successfully in our college of business for assistance in monitoring our AOL processes. A dashboard has been created for each undergraduate learning goal and for each graduate learning goal to track progress over time. For example, our dashboards indicate the following in an easy-to-read format:

- Time period of last assessment for each learning goal.
- Course in which last assessment was conducted.
- Results of artifact assessment for each course assessed.
- Abbreviated documentation of interventions, close the loop activities, and suggestions for continuous improvement.
- Cycle schedule for future assessments for each learning goal.

### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

In summary, this paper contends that the constructs of organizational theory can enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of AOL processes in colleges of business. Reexamining the common functional organization structure and adopting elements of a matrix structure can increase coordination, collaboration, and flexibility. Dropping traditional buffering roles and increasing boundary spanning roles for faculty members can result in quicker adaptation for meeting AACSB accreditation requirements. Transforming colleges of business into learning organizations and utilizing mimetic forces can enhance the quantity and quality of information processes in terms of passing information into and out of the internal organization—crossing the organization's boundary. A shift from pooled and sequential intraorganizational interdependencies toward reciprocal interdependencies can enhance faculty member engagement in AOL processes. Finally, the use of appropriate information technology methods, such as executive dashboards, can facilitate improved monitoring and control of AOL processes.

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