

OUTCOMES ASSESSMENT MEASURES IN THE PRACTICE EXPERIENCE CURRICULUM

Stephen Hurlbut, Georgia White; Westminster College, 1840 S. 1300 E. Salt Lake City, UT 84501; (801) 832-2600

ABSTRACT

Practice Experience credit (cooperative education) is required of all undergraduate business majors. Challenges that faced the faculty directing this program included developing an outcomes assessment measure tied to skills and outcomes criteria and one that would provide valuable feedback for students and faculty. Early results indicate that the new assessment tool yielded more varied responses and more details for curriculum applications.

OUR STORY

Westminster College is a small liberal arts college located in Salt Lake City. While the Northwest Association of Schools and Colleges have accredited the college for years, the Gore School of Business faculty did not pursue accreditation until the early nineties. The business school sought the Association of Collegiate Business Schools and Programs. As with AACSB, ACBSP requires the implementation of outcomes assessments to assist in the assurance that "significant and favorable learning and attitudinal changes have occurred between enrollment and graduation." (ACBSP Guidelines)

The question facing the faculty was, "In addition to the knowledge base, what outcomes are most appropriate for our students?" This led to an extensive interview process of top business leaders across the region. The open-ended personal interviews resulted in the identification of skill competency criteria business leaders thought most important. A committee of faculty and administration reviewed the survey results in addition to feedback from students and alumni. This process yielded ten skills and outcome categories which include; finding information or research skills, quantitative literacy, oral and written communications, critical thinking and evaluation, entrepreneurial skills, systems awareness, technology literacy, action/consequences awareness, interpersonal/team group skills, and disciplinary knowledge and integration. A further explanation of these categories is presented in Appendix 1.

OUTCOMES ASSESSMENT

Continuous improvement and accountability have been at the forefront of business education over the past decade. Accountability has taken the form of outcomes assessment while continuous improvement is associated with curriculum development. The objective of both concepts is to provide the best possible educational environment and curriculum so students leave with a strong knowledge base and a framework on which to place academic and 'real world' experiences. Outcomes assessments should measure the extent of these changes at graduation with this feedback aiding curriculum development.

Haase (1992) suggested five benefits of outcomes assessment: (1) a curriculum that can be explained and justifies in the context of what it will produce, (2) a common standard of knowledge and skills for students, (3) a better prepared student for the work force, (4) continuous evaluation of courses and the overall programs, and (5) positive motivation for faculty and students because what needs to be done is clear.

PRACTICE EXPERIENCE INITIATIVE

Analysis of the accreditation self study and business leader survey indicated a need to provide students with opportunities to apply their academic knowledge and to gain 'real world' experience prior to graduation. The college faculty voted to require a practice experience component as part of the undergraduate business degree, effective September 2000. This practice experience requirement states that a student must complete a minimum of two hours in one of three areas; professional portfolio, disciplinary practicum (field study), or internship.

Practice Experience Assessment

Practice experience or cooperative education provides a way to complement academic programs. The flexibility and nature of these programs allow experimental education to fit within the mission and educational goals of business programs.

Challenges confronting cooperative education include faculty involvement and the measurement of student and program success. (Hartley & Smith, 2000). Since practice experience is the bridge between the business

environment and academics, faculty involvement is of importance; in fact faculty involvement has been linked to the value of a cooperative education program (Cates & Jones 1999). The Westminster practice experience program is lead by two full time faculty, who are also in charge of teaching the classes associated with the various practice experience alternatives. Outcomes feedback from practice experience would serve the development of classroom materials for these faculty as well as involving other business faculty in the cooperative education experiences. Further, this assessment feedback may be utilized for curriculum development outside the practice experience program.

Unfortunately, evidence indicates that little research is being conducted in general within the cooperative education field (Rowe, Ricks & Varty, 1999; Ricks, Cutt, Branton, Loken & Van Gyn, 1993). Therefore, no standardized or commonly utilized measure existed. Nor was there a body of literature to help guide the process. The immediate challenge facing the practice experience faculty was, "How to measure the effectiveness of skills and outcome criteria acquired through course work when demonstrated by the student in an experiential learning situation?" A secondary challenge was to provide feedback to faculty that would demonstrate the effectiveness of practice experience with regard to enriching the academic growth of students and to identify gaps within the academic program.

INSTRUMENT DEVELOPMENT

A decision was made to focus on the internship class, as an employer evaluation instrument already existed. The Career Center had developed a general instrument utilized by Arts and Sciences as well as the Gore School of Business. The original instrument was comprised of nine categories and utilized a five-point scale as well as a 'not applicable' option. An example of this instrument can be found in Appendix 3.

After reviewing internship supervisors' responses to this form, two areas of concern appeared. First, while there was some overlap with the business school's skills and outcome criteria, the information provided by the current form lacked the necessary feedback for business program improvement. The instrument needed to be modified to reflect the skills criteria. If this was accomplished, then results could be used to aid an individual student's ability to strengthen their weaker skills, to help faculty in delivering

class content to enhance these skills, and to help with curriculum development. Second, the supervisor ratings from these forms were quite high and many items were marked 'not applicable'. While this may indicate internship students, as a whole, had little room to improve (unlikely), it may instead signify that the criteria for evaluation were not defined and/or not related to a business curriculum internship.

During spring of 2001, a committee was formed to analyze the internship assessment tool. One obstacle in this development related to the Career Center's role of sending out and monitoring the internship evaluations and the center's request that an identical instrument be utilized across campus to avoid employer confusion. This presented a challenge to practice experience given the desire to match evaluation criteria with the definitions associated with the business school skills and outcome criteria.

A new evaluation instrument was developed to parallel (as closely as possible given the constraints listed in the previous paragraph) the skills and outcomes criteria followed in the business school. Definitions were written to explain the criteria. The five-point scale was still utilized with the 'not applicable' option. This instrument and definitions are presented in Appendix 4. The new instrument was tested during the summer semester internship class.

RESULTS

We decided to compare the results from the spring and summer semester to explore whether our previous concerns were alleviated by the new instrument. The results are presented in table below.

	Old Form	New Form
Range of	3.9-5.0	3.3-5.0
Means		
Mean	4.75	4.49
Median	4.95	4.6
Number of		
NA responses	9	2
N	20	37

The results from the new instrument showed more variation in the supervisor's responses when compare with the previous form. Given that almost twice as many students signed up for summer internships, this increase in participation may have contributed to the variability. Still, the variability might be attributed to a form that is more applicable to business students and one that provides more direction for the evaluator. We

were pleased to see a reduction in the use of the 'not applicable' responses. The internships themselves were similar in both semesters (approximately the same percentage of aviation, finance, marketing, etc.) This leads us to believe that the definitions and criteria utilized in the new instrument provided more guidance for the supervisors.

Although this was the initial use of the instrument, we were definitely encouraged by the results of the new form. This new assessment tool will need to be tested over the next few semesters to truly evaluate the effectiveness for all concerned.

CONCLUSIONS

Our next step involves taking the results of the internship evaluations and providing the results to curriculum committees and professors of the core business classes. If certain skills and outcomes received average scores, these skills can receive more attention when incorporated into the core classes. For example, one area receiving lower scores is that of communications, especially interpersonal communications relating to group leadership. The faculty should examine group development and group skill opportunities within the curriculum.

Practice experience has been an exciting challenge as this academic area requirement affects the entire undergraduate business student population. Furthermore, developing evaluation tools to reflect skills and outcome categories has been rewarding. A sense of completion is realized when this information is forwarded to the faculty and students closing the feedback loop and contributing to the strategic planning process.

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