

Managing Learning Experiences In An AACSB Environment: Beyond The Classroom

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ABSTRACT

The study explores the development and management of a rich learning environment that extends the traditional classroom to include significant co-curricular programs. Learning enrichment is guided by the individual mission of the business school, accreditation agency (AACSB), and in our case, the Jesuit mission. That central framework provides a student centric focus to achieve our mission as well as our specific Assurance of Learning objectives. Key concepts discussed include identifying management models/approaches, how to measure the richness of the learning experience, maintaining Assurance of Learning standards, as well as a variety of implementation issues.

Keywords: Learning experiences, AACSB, Assurance of Learning, Co-curricular experiences.

INTRODUCTION

Student learning should be the central focus of all university programs with the assessment of that learning playing a key role at all program levels. The importance of that focus is clearly evident as many, if not all, accreditation bodies increasingly demand the assurance of student learning as a major part of the documentation required for successful accreditation and maintenance of accreditation. Specifically, the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business International (AACSB) has a very strong emphasis on the role of Assurance of Learning in the accreditation processes. Indeed, in the future perhaps as many as 20-40% of business schools may receive a “sixth year” for failing to assess and document successfully student learning achievements.

As a first step in learning assessment, AACSB recommends that the school develop a list of learning goals for which it will demonstrate an Assurance of Learning. The specific set of goals may vary from institution to institution and derives from the school’s mission. In this sense, the mission and objectives frame the school’s intentions which then become a specific set of learning goals that identify how the degree programs demonstrate the mission. In other words, the learning goals translate the mission statement into the desired educational accomplishments of the degree programs (AACSB International, 2007).

Learning goals serve a number of purposes and convey to participants, faculty, and students, the educational outcomes toward which they are working. This helps set priorities and emphasis, design learning experiences, and fulfill educational expectations (AACSB International, 2007). One approach to assessing learning goals is to develop a set of rubrics that score and lay out the specific expectations for an assignment. Rubrics divide the assignment into its component parts and provide a detailed description of what constitutes an acceptable or unacceptable performance level for each of the parts. In its simplest form, the rubric includes a task description (the assignment), a scale (levels of achievement), the assignment’s dimensions (a breakdown of the skills/knowledge involved in the assignment), and descriptions of what constitutes each performance level (specific feedback) all set out on a grid (Stevens & Levi, 2005).

At the program level, rubrics assist in ascertaining whether students in required core courses are achieving an acceptable performance level as set out by curriculum and Assurance of Learning committees. Assessment can be accomplished in a variety of ways that include major field tests, demonstration through stand-alone performance testing, and/or course-embedded techniques. The latter, course embedded assessment, is an approach recommended by AACSB to implement and document Assurance of Learning. Required courses may expose students to systematic learning experiences designed to produce graduates with the particular knowledge or abilities specified in the school's learning goals. The course-embedded measurements must be constructed to demonstrate whether students achieve the school's learning goals, and the measurement must be a mandated part of that course (AACSB International, 2007).

Another approach to assessing and documenting learning experiences is the co-curricular *Passport* model pioneered by Xavier University. The Passport vision augments the traditional classroom setting with a rich set of learning experiences to create an environment set apart from those of many universities. The *managed*, co-curricular learning environment reflects a *student centric* approach that extends the classroom with additional activities to achieve a business school's particular mission. Examples of co-curricular learning experiences are varied and may include mentoring programs, reality based simulation, and/or internships combined with resume and professional networking workshops.

The model provides a powerful recruiting tool that identifies a business school's distinctive competence and differentiates it from the graduates of "peer" and "aspirant" schools. The result – schools move away from the "sprinkle a few seeds and see what grows model" to a single encapsulated effort that manages, documents and measures a systematic approach of the student learning experience.

The approach encapsulates the assurance of learning standards adopted by AACSB in Standard 15 that state that a school use well documented systematic processes to develop, monitor, evaluate, and revise the substance and delivery of the curricula of degree programs and to assess the impact of the curricula on learning. The standard requires the use of a systematic process for curriculum management but does not specify any particular courses or activities within the curriculum. Normally, the curriculum management process results in an undergraduate degree program that includes learning experiences in such general knowledge and skill areas as:

1. Communication abilities
2. Ethical understanding and reasoning abilities
3. Analytic skills
4. Use of information technology
5. Multicultural and diversity understanding
6. Reflective thinking skills (AACSB International, 2007)

A well managed co-curricular model such as Xavier's Passport program provides a mechanism for documentation and curriculum change. However, significant challenges do exist and may arise, for example, when the university relies on a faculty centric approach to implementation. Managing co-curricular activities are not normally a part of a faculty's workload nor traditionally tied to the reward system. Faculty may resist an approach not perceived as a "normal" part of their activity.

A second challenge is how much depth and breadth should be included in an approach. Should the "learning experiences" focus more on breadth with little concern for depth or does a "few significant in-depth experiences" satisfy the standard? Also, resource allocation becomes an important part of the equation. Are ample resources such as auxiliary staff available to manage the breadth of learning experiences? How is the decision made to prioritize learning experiences and what decision rules guide this process? Finally, a number of management models exist to accomplish this process that range from laissez faire to highly managed, well coordinated activities (Figure 1). For example, does a laze fare approach inhibit or restrict a systematic collection of the data? On the other hand, a highly coordinated process may be so resource intensive as to prohibit implementation.

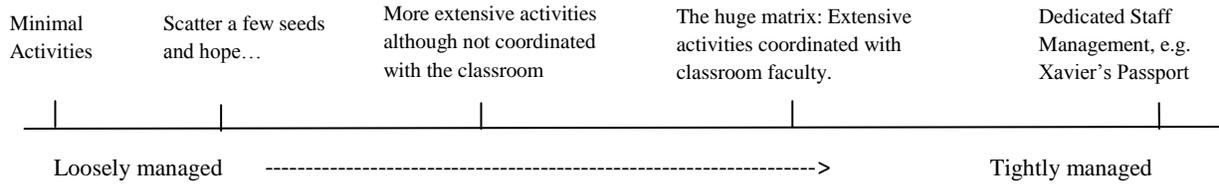


Figure 1. Managing the co-curricular learning experiences.

The recent AACSB emphasis in learning experiences and program level assessment activities along with potential program revisions is proving rather problematic. With that in mind this paper's intent is twofold:

- Present the authors' experience in developing a rich environment of co-curricular learning experiences;
- Identify lessons learned in implementing a strategy to manage and foster those learning experiences in an AACSB environment.

BEYOND THE CLASSROOM

Most traditional universities provide some form of co-curricular learning experiences for their students. The quality and depth of those experiences may vary considerably in relationship with the institution's mission and goals. The outcome and intent however, is often the same - to extend student learning and development to a richer, deeper level. Indeed, the degree to which students engage in, as well the quality and depth of those experiences has proven to be a powerful predictor of learning and development (Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Pace, 1980; Wang, 2002).

The management and assessment of learning experiences is an important part of a student centered, value added educational approach. To this end, the National Study of Student Engagement (NSSE) measures a number of variables in regard to student engagement in learning activities that include student-faculty contact, active learning, etc. AACSB has incorporated 'learning experiences' as an integral part of its educational focus and goal.

Integrating the management and assessment of co-curricular learning experiences with traditional classroom activities is a challenging proposition. Marquette University employs a three prong/level approach to learning assessment at the program, individual course, and institutional level. At our institution we are actively examining a similar view that inter-relates course embedded learning activities (and assessment) with a co-curricular learning environment (Figure 2).

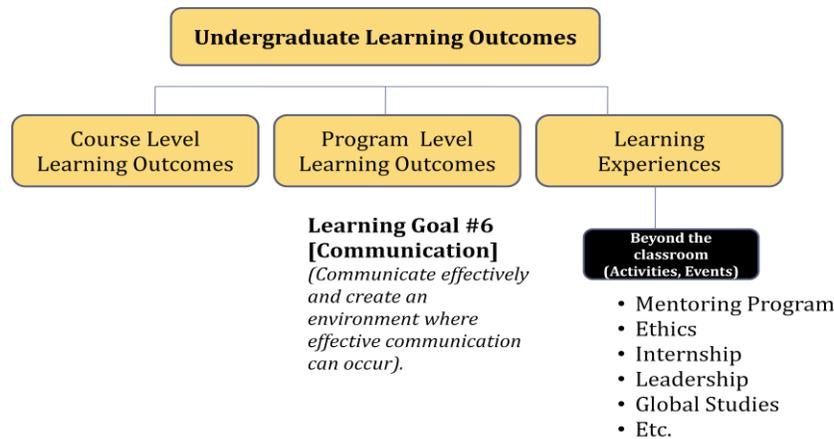


Figure 2. A proposed assessment model demonstrating the role of co-curricular activities. Adapted from models utilized by Marquette University.

MODELING AN INSTITUTION’S EXTRA-CLASSROOM LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Developing a set of learning experiences that support a student centered, value added education requires a deep understanding of the specific institution’s mission. The richness/composition the experiences is certainly not measured on a profound absolute scale but rather is measured relevant to the institution and its goals. For example, a traditional Ph.D. granting institution that prepares students for graduate school may focus on higher levels of learning that reflect a departmentally based curriculum (Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992; Wang, 2002). Alternatively, a four year institution whose graduates often directly enter the workforce may emphasize/value reality based learning, internships, and professional development, etc. In each instance a substantially different spectrum of learning objectives, goals, and measures are created.

Immersing students in positive experiences that foster professional development, leadership, ethics, and global studies is central to our Jesuit mission. At each step activities are targeted and selected that promote a greater self awareness in the student. As a student self awareness increases, so does self confidence that hopefully leads to additional exploration and engagement in mentoring processes and internships. In time a positive re-enforcement exchanges build and foster a reciprocal developmental process (Figure 3).

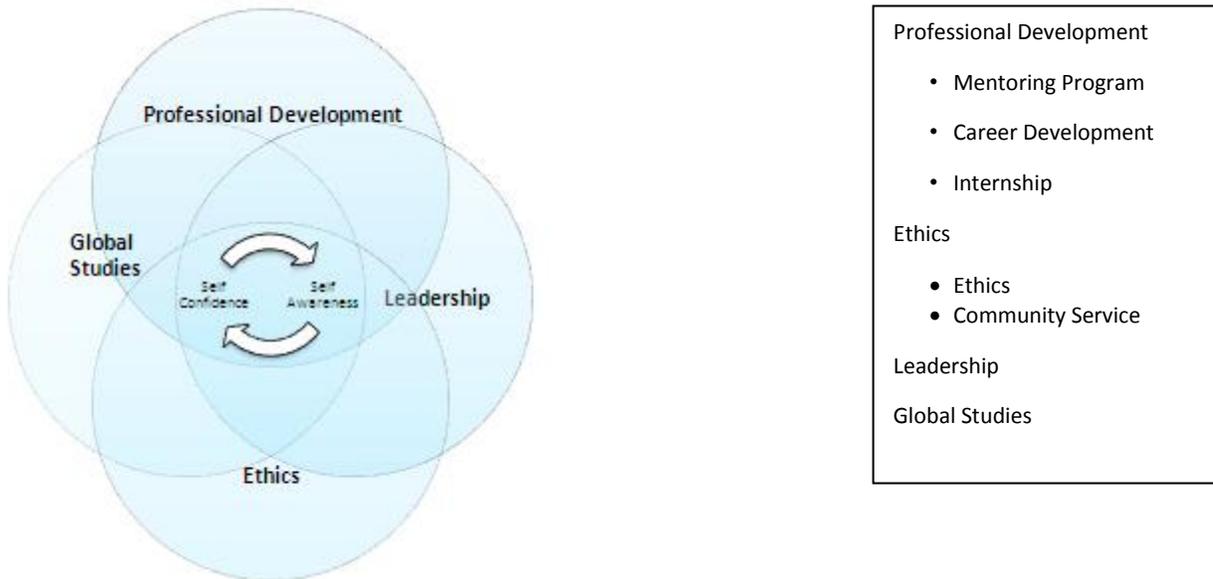


Figure 3. A simplified model of learning experiences

EVALUATING THE QUALITY OF THE EXPERIENCE

Given this framework we identified three criteria to guide our deliberation on what qualified as a rich learning experience. Firstly we valued those experiences where-in a student would look back on after leaving the institution and would ask “Of all your experiences, which one made a difference?” Secondly we emphasized those experiences that had multiple touches within a year and across the four years. Thirdly, the experience must/should involve a learning component such as a reflective essay, a presentation, etc. We examined where we were and where we wanted to be relative to our goals, to our immediate competition, AACSB peer institutions and target schools. (Figure 4.)

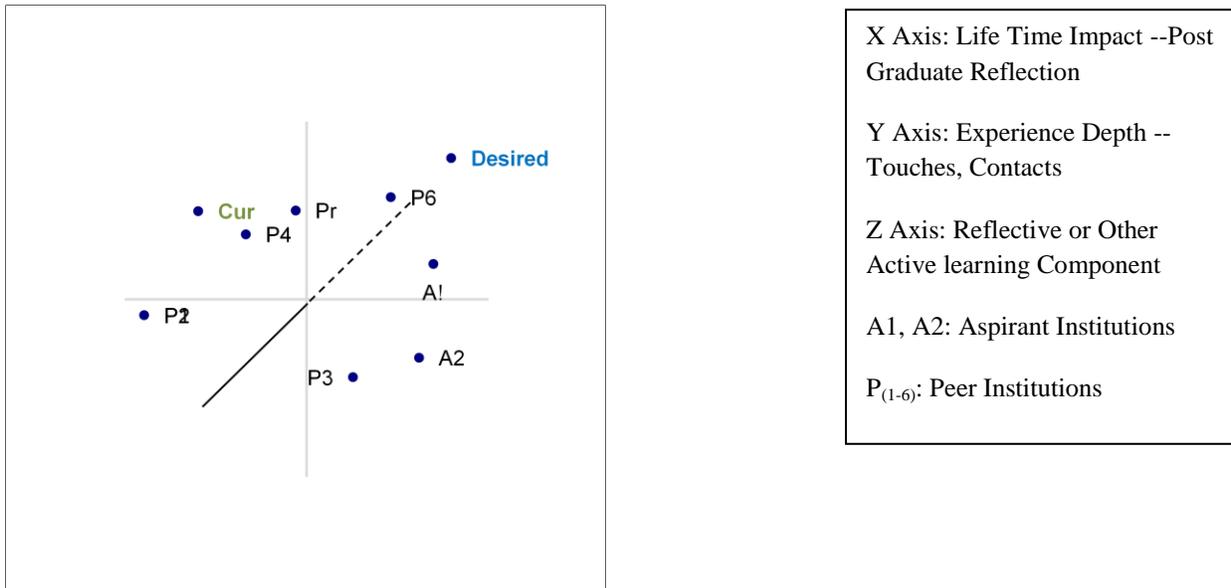


Figure 4. A sample graph depicting our current and target state relative to our peer institutions.

A second important dimension is the penetration of the experience, i.e., what percent of our students actually completed a mentor program, an internship, etc. The richness of the experience modeled against student penetration helped clarify our current and target states (Figure 5.) For example, when we evaluated the Internship program we found that student participation was relatively low and the program lacked additional learning components. The program was central to the College’s mission and was subsequently identified as a candidate for additional promotion/marketing and enhancement. Conversely other learning experiences not central to the College mission residing in Quadrant III might be potential candidates for elimination in the current resource constrained environment. Learning experiences in Quadrants I and IV can similarly be examined to determine what might be needed to accomplish specific learning objectives as well as maintain critical Assurance of Learning goals.

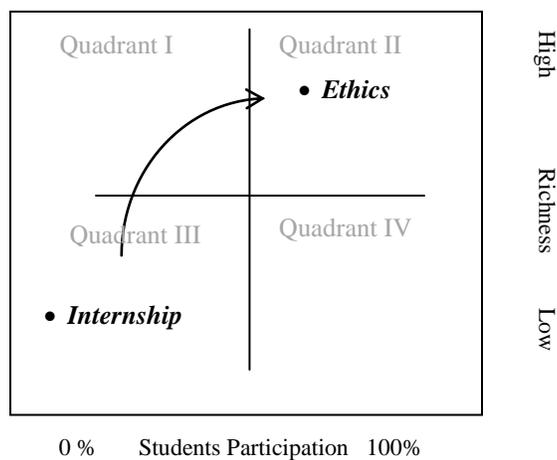


Figure 5. Comparing the richness of the learning environment with student participation levels for two key learning experiences.

MANAGING THE MIX

Managing the mix of learning experiences is a critical element of creating a true value added environment. In our Jesuit Mission we identified a core set of learning experiences (Figure 3) that we felt central to accomplishing that mission. And while simultaneously developing all of the components would be desirable, reality dictated that we target a few key areas and do those well in modular fashion as resources become available. Eventually our intent was to fully develop all learning modules/ areas and potential implement a Passport like approach. Our vision is that once the modules are in place and operational, we can shift to a fully managed environment where degree requirements include participation in a minimal number of events (resume & networking workshops) and completion of say 3 of 5 major learning activities such as an internship, mentoring program, etc.

For example, ethics plays an important role in our Jesuit Mission and an area that was targeted for enrichment. In a series of moves depicted in Table 1 we established ethics as a major learning goal and laid the foundation of a College level Center for Leadership and Ethics, etc.

Our current state is an improvement over where we started but still not at our target state. We rely heavily on faculty to encourage student attendance at workshops and/or include a reflective component in their course. The problem is that we have become the partially managed matrix of many faculty encouraging students, maybe including a reflective component, maybe not. Our goal would be to use the Passport model where students might sign up for a 1 hour activity course, graded pass fail, that included the completion of again 3-5 major modules such as an internship, mentoring program, etc.

Table 1. Historical development of a learning goal with co-curricular enrichment.

| Step | Action |
|--|---|
| Initial  Future | Identification of Ethics as a learning goal Requirement as a learning goal in all core courses Concurrent – Development of Rubric & Assessment of Activities Concurrent – Hiring a Director for the <i>Center for Leadership & Ethics</i> Creation of high quality Ethic workshops featuring nationally known speakers, CEO’s, etc. Logging student attendance at Ethics Workshops Formal inclusion in graduation requirements. |

SUMMARY

Today’s educational climate is a dramatic shift from a faculty centric teaching environment to student centric learning. In our institution our goal was to extend and compliment the traditional classroom with a rich set of co-curricular learning experiences. Transitioning from a traditional state is a serious undertaking where the target state must be consistent with the mission and intent of the Business School. As an AACSB accredited university, we also needed to make that transition in a managed state where we maintained a consistent Assurance of Learning.

The richness of the learning environment does vary from university to university but for us included combining three dimensions: lifetime significance impact, the depth of the experience, and a learning reflection/component. Comparison with peer and aspirant AACSB institutions helped map out the process to ensure a steady progression.

In the end our guiding philosophy was to create a managed learning environment with significant student penetration matched with quality experiences that last a life time. And while *scatter a few seeds and see what grows* may have some value, our intent was a managed state that added value and focus to student education.

AUTHOR INFORMATION

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