

The Integrated Business Curriculum: An Examination of Perceptions and Practices

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ABSTRACT. Constituents often criticize business schools for failing to provide students with a comprehensive understanding of how business organizations function. Business schools have responded to the mandate with attempts to integrate discipline-specific functional knowledge into a coherent understanding of the evolving business organization. Successful integration of the undergraduate business curriculum will result in students who are more directly involved in the learning process and will increase curricular relevance by translating functional knowledge into business skills. However, curriculum integration is an extensive and potentially disruptive curricular change that may involve cost and is fraught with pitfalls. The authors surveyed deans at member schools of the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business International to assess the extent to which and the manner in which integration has taken place within the business curriculum.

Keywords: assessment, business schools, core curriculum, integration

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In this study, we surveyed deans at schools that were members of the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business International (AACSB) to assess their perceptions of an integrated curriculum and also to assess the progress made in developing such an integrated business curriculum. An integrated curriculum is designed to emphasize the interrelationships between functional areas of a business, thereby providing students with an understanding of how businesses operate. Previous research has provided the rationale for and the methods used in curriculum integration, but no study has provided a comprehensive overview of the current state of integrated curriculum in business schools. We tried to fill this void in the research.

An integrated curriculum is an innovative method of business education with a broad-based, multidisciplinary, organization-centric approach. This technique departs significantly from traditional function-centric business education. An integrated business curriculum offers many benefits. However, the development and successful implementation of this educational change is difficult. DeConinck and Steiner (1999) suggested that an integrated curriculum provides students with a better understanding of the dependencies between the functional areas of the firm, emphasizes effective communication and the

ability to work in cross-functional teams, and fosters a better understanding of organizational purpose, resources, and functioning. In addition to the traditional focus on acquiring knowledge, the integrated curriculum emphasizes developing skills that are relevant to a successful career.

The extent of potential benefits and the transformational nature of an integrated curriculum have resulted in much attention in the scholarly literature. According to Hamilton, McFarland, and Mirchandani (2000), more than 60 publications have reported on 20 different methods to integrate the business curriculum at 35 universities. Much of the existing literature focuses on descriptions of the external forces that create the demand for integration (e.g., Porter & McKibbin, 1988; Stover, Morris, Pharr, Reyes, & Byers, 1997) or examines techniques used in curriculum integration (e.g., Brunel & Hibbard, 2006; DeMoranville, Aurand, & Gordon, 2000; Kwok, 1994; Young & Murphy, 2003). Although this literature has made a significant contribution to the field, it fails to provide direct evidence of the perception of business school deans of the forces that motivate integration. In addition, prior studies do not examine the frequency with which proposed methods of integration are used. Last, few data exist regarding the techniques used to assess the success

of curriculum integration. These issues provide the motivation for the present study.

We surveyed business school deans to examine the perceived need to integrate the curriculum and the factors motivating this need. We also examined the methods used in curriculum integration, the resources allocated, the current status of the integration project, and the methods of assessing the success on integration.

Demand for and Cost of Curriculum Integration

Faculty, students, and the business community exert significant pressure and demands on the content and form of business school curricula (Heinfeldt & Wolf, 1998; Ramaswamy, 1992). The business community prefers employees who are team players, understand organizational interactions, and make decisions that benefit the entire company. If curriculum integration develops these skills, employers will support initiatives in this area. Current and potential students may demand curriculum integration (Smith-Ducliffe, Tromley, & Tucker, 2006) under the perception that an integrated curriculum will provide enhanced educational experiences and better employment opportunities.

Integrated curriculum development has largely been the result of perceived demand from the business community for employees with multidisciplinary skills. DeMoranville et al. (2000) stated that business organizations have begun to focus on the development of cross-functional teams. Although organizations value employees with cross-functional skills, evidence suggests that functionally aligned organizations find it difficult to make the transition to cross-functional teams (Bishop, 1999), largely because employees lack a cross-functional perspective (Gerwin, 1999) and associate with functional departments more than they associate with organizational goals (Hennessey, 1999). This creates a demand from the business community for students who understand how businesses operate and who can perform in cross-functional teams.

Students will likely attend business schools that they believe will provide the highest quality education and the

best employment opportunities on graduation. Employers value students who have an understanding of how business organizations function. An integrated curriculum builds this skill set, and hence potential employers may recruit heavily at schools with such a curriculum. Because of the benefits that likely accrue to students (higher-quality education and better employment opportunities) and the university (prestige, enrollment, and budgets), business school faculty have a strong motivation to attain the objectives of an integrated curriculum. Faculty involvement is important to this initiative because it is the business school faculty who will design, implement, and assess the success of the initiative.

Although the AACSB tries to avoid prescribing a cookie-cutter business curriculum, the organization does list the integrated curriculum concept as an interesting new curricular development that business schools need to look at, adapt, or improve on (Ryan, 1999). In addition, the AACSB standards recommend an integrated core business curriculum and analysis of organizational issues using a cross-functional methodology.

The AACSB has played a key role in influencing the business curriculum by participating in influential studies on standards and practices, which has enabled universities to provide world-class management education. Porter and McKibbin (1988) specifically raised the issue of curriculum integration. This proactive project appraised the then-current state of management education, considered the likely future if no major changes were made, and developed a set of recommendations for the direction in which the profession should be moving. An important conclusion from this project was that there was insufficient emphasis on integration across the functional areas. The need for curriculum integration was reinforced in 2002 with the publication of *Management Education at Risk: Report of the Management Education Task Force to the AACSB International Board of Directors*. In a section titled "Blurring Disciplinary Boundaries," the AACSB (2002) stated that

A prime example of concerns about currency and relevance of business curricula relates to the functional silos that provide

the organizational framework for departments, core curricula, and even elective courses in typical business degree programs. Yet actual business problems or solutions rarely present themselves in neatly organized, vertical silos. (p. 20)

The successful implementation of an integrated curriculum requires investment of significant resources and substantial effort on the part of the faculty. Failure to garner these resources may account for the relatively low level of integration in business schools today. Specifically, in a survey of AACSB-accredited undergraduate business schools, DeMoranville et al. (2000) found that although most (90%) had a senior capstone course that integrated business functions, very few (less than 5%) had a comprehensive program that formally addressed the need for cross-functional integration of business principles.

The significant costs associated with the delivery of an integrated curriculum may also play a role in its slow adoption. Kwok (1994) recognized the pitfalls associated with integration when he suggested that although an integrated approach seems preferable, in reality the extent and manner of integration leaves much to be desired. Pharr (2000, 2003) has noted that the cause of many of the problems cited in integrating the curriculum may be found in the attitudinal, infrastructure, and resource support allocated to the implementation of an integrated curriculum. Another hurdle to the development of an integrated curriculum is the need to align faculty perceptions of the importance of functional competence to the needs of the integrated business-process-driven curriculum. The failure to align perceptions may result in curriculum modifications that veer toward a brokered compromise between functional disciplines rather than a ground-up review of the complete business curriculum.

Common Methods of Curriculum Integration

Until recently, many colleges of business relied entirely on a single course, often a senior capstone, to provide students with an integrated experience. Because of the perceived demands exerted on them by the business community, students, faculty, and AACSB, business

schools have enhanced their coverage of integrative topics and have considered new techniques for achieving the objectives of an integrated curriculum. We review some common methods.

The use of a comprehensive case over the entire business curriculum is a commonly adopted methodology that delivers a consistent message on the integrated nature of the business organization. Besides the desired objective of introducing the students to the integrated nature of businesses, the case approach can be used to provide students with semantic knowledge skills, higher-order critical thinking skills, and a real-world orientation. Environmental changes can also be incorporated in cases on a periodic basis without the need to make extensive modifications to the case and without loss of continuity. Markulis, Howe, and Strang (2005) presented the rationale, methodology, and process of developing such a case-based model for curriculum integration and outlined plans to integrate the case into upper-level business courses.

Another model for delivery of an integrated undergraduate curriculum follows the entrepreneurial path of new product development. Brunel and Hibbard (2006) described such a process, wherein 4 traditional courses (marketing, operations, information systems, and finance) are integrated into a 16-credit, semester-long sequence. This process culminates in a project in which students develop a comprehensive business plan for a new consumer product idea. Walker and Ainsworth (2001) illustrated a similar business-process approach to delivering the core undergraduate curriculum, consistent with the trend toward process-managed organizations. Their study also investigated how accounting education can be incorporated into this model and how a process-centered curriculum may give accounting students a broader and more integrated educational experience.

Some business schools have proposed the use of course modules to integrate the business curriculum. For example, Miller (2000) reported on an attempt to improve business and economics instruction by integrating economics and other undergraduate business disciplines that were previously taught in

stand-alone courses, into a 6-module sequence over 2 semesters, and provided a qualitative benefit–cost analysis of the integration effort.

A wide variety of methods have been used to integrate curriculum. Although this research provides an interesting description of some of the newer methods used in curricular integration, it does not provide quantitative information about the commonly used techniques. Such information is of interest to business schools whose administrators are trying to choose among alternative integration methods. In the present article, we fill this void by presenting direct evidence on this issue.

METHOD

We designed the survey that we used in this study to provide data on the current state of curriculum integration in AACSB member schools. It was intended to capture information related to attempts at integrating the curriculum—factors driving the change toward an integrated curriculum, the techniques

used by business schools to meet the goals of integration, and the methods used to assess the success of integration efforts. The survey comprises 29 questions: 9 demographic questions about the deans and their institution, 3 questions about the respondent's perception of the significance of curriculum integration, 4 questions about the current status of curriculum integration at the respondent's school, 7 questions about resources used in the process, 2 questions about curriculum integration methods, and 4 questions about the assessment of curriculum integration efforts.

The AACSB provided us e-mail addresses, which enabled us to communicate with business school deans. Deans are often surveyed for their perceptions on matters of importance to the academic community (e.g., Hazeldine & Miles, 2007; Martell, 2007; Pringle & Michel, 2007). However, to the best of our knowledge, ours was the first survey to assess the extent and manner to which integration has taken place within the business curriculum. In November 2005, we sent to business school deans

TABLE 1. Business School Deans' Perception of Need to Integrate the Business Curriculum

To what degree do you perceive the need to integrate the undergraduate core curriculum?

Degree	Frequency	%
Strong need	69	48.2
Mild need	47	32.9
Neutral	20	14.0
Very little need	6	4.2
No need	1	0.7
Total	143	100.0

If you perceive there is a need to integrate the undergraduate core curriculum, what factors motivated your perception?

Factor	Frequency	%
Critical to future success of students	110	76.9
Part of accreditation requirements	38	26.6
Encouragement or pressure from recruiters or employers	26	18.2
Initiated by faculty	29	20.3
Encouragement or pressure from advisory board	24	16.8
Pressure from current students	7	4.9
There is no perceived need for integration	7	4.9
Other	13	9.1
Total	254	177.6

Note. Multiple responses were allowed.

a short e-mail explaining the purpose of the project and soliciting their cooperation in completing the project. The e-mail directed participants to a Web-based survey to answer a brief questionnaire regarding their perceptions about the integration process and their school's practices relating to curricular integration. A follow-up letter was sent in December 2005. Of 630 deans, 143 chose to participate in the project, a response rate of approximately 23%.

RESULTS

We grouped the results of this survey into five issues related to curriculum integration: the significance of curriculum integration, the current status of the integration process, methods used to integrate the curriculum, resources necessary for integration, and an assessment of integration efforts. We first examined the perceived need to integrate the business curriculum, with emphasis placed on the underlying factors that motivate the need to integrate. Participants were asked their perception of the need to integrate the curriculum. Results of this analysis are presented in Table 1. Of the 143 respondents, 116 (81.1%) reported a strong need or a mild need to integrate the business curriculum across disciplines. Based on these results, it is clear that respondents believe in the importance of curriculum integration across disciplines. This result is not surprising given the demands placed on business schools to integrate the curriculum.

Next, we examined the factors that motivated the need to integrate the curriculum. Respondents were provided with a list of factors and were asked to select those that might have influenced their perception of the need to integrate across disciplines. The results of this analysis are presented in Table 1. Respondents indicated that the most important factor motivating curriculum integration was that it was critical to the future success of students (76.9%). Other motivating factors cited were accreditation requirements (26.6%), part of a faculty initiative (20.3%), encouragement or pressure from recruiters and employers (18.2%), and encouragement or pressure from advisory boards (16.8%).

TABLE 2. Participant Responses to the Question, "Which statement best describes the current status of undergraduate curriculum integration efforts in your academic unit?"

Response	Frequency	%
We have examined the concept of integration and are in the process of developing an integration plan.	52	37.1
We have not examined the concept of integration.	40	28.6
We have implemented a plan to integrate the undergraduate core curriculum.	32	22.9
We have examined the concept of integration and have decided not to pursue it.	14	10.0
We started the planning process but discontinued efforts before implementation.	2	1.4
Total	140	100.0

Note. Multiple responses were allowed.

TABLE 3. Methods of Business Curriculum Integration

<i>Where should integration efforts be made?</i>		
Response	Frequency	%
Core curriculum	105	73.4
Business policy and strategy course	92	64.3
Capstone case course	88	61.5
Introductory business course	69	48.3
Across the entire curriculum, including courses in the major	39	27.3
Other	8	5.6
Total	401	280.4

What methods have you used or do you plan to use to provide an integrated curriculum?

Method	Frequency	%
Business policy and strategy course	85	59.4
Use of current topics (e.g., <i>Business Week</i> , <i>Wall Street Journal</i>) to discuss cross-discipline implications	73	51.0
Guest speakers	72	50.3
Critical thinking and interpersonal skills	69	48.3
Team teaching	63	44.0
A common and consistent message (e.g., teamwork, communication skills, ethics) across the curriculum	63	44.0
Use of cases within each course	59	41.2
Community service, mentoring, and internships	58	40.5
Multi-disciplinary student teams	49	34.3
Participation in live, multi-disciplinary projects with local businesses	48	33.6
Use of a common case across core courses	44	30.8
Development of nontraditional multi-disciplinary courses	38	26.6
Individual faculty members teaching diverse disciplines	35	24.5
Schedule core courses as a block rather than as single courses	32	22.4
Refocus current curriculum on business processes	29	20.3
Use of information systems component across core courses	26	18.2
Lock-step curriculum	10	7.0
Other	9	6.3
Total	862	602.8

Note. Multiple responses were allowed.

It is encouraging that respondents concurred with the AACSB that curriculum integration is important to providing high-quality education. It is also important to note that respondents perceived that their advisory boards, which generally comprise professionals from outside the colleges of business, favor integration of the curriculum.

We next examined the current status of integration efforts at business schools. Because of the perception that integration is an important factor in the success of business school graduates, it is rational to expect significant progress toward curriculum integration. The current status of integration efforts are presented in Table 2. Surprisingly, 40% of schools either had not examined the concept of curriculum integration or had examined the concept and decided not to pursue it. Only 22.9% of schools had implemented a plan to integrate the undergraduate core curriculum, although 37.1% of schools were in the process of developing a plan for curricular integration. This lack of integration may be due to the high costs associated with curriculum integration.

There are many places in the business curriculum where integration could take place. We provided participants with a list of logical places for curriculum integration and asked them to choose where, in their perception, the integration effort should be made. The results of this analysis are presented in Table 3. Most respondents believed that the appropriate place for curriculum integration was in the core curriculum (73.4%). A business policy and strategy course (64.3%), a capstone case course (61.5%), and an introductory business course (48.3%) were also favored places in which to integrate the curriculum. This finding suggests that integration could commonly occur at multiple stages in the business curriculum.

An important consideration for the many institutions whose administrators are planning curriculum integration is the method used to achieve curricular integration. Table 3 presents methods that business school administrators planned to use or had used to provide an integrated curriculum. The most common method for facilitating curricular integration was the use of the business policy and strategy course (59.4%), followed by

TABLE 4. Resources for Business Curriculum Integration

If you are pursuing or have implemented curricular integration, what resources facilitated integration efforts?

Resource	Frequency	%
Interest or commitment from faculty	61	42.7
Information or attendance at AACSB conferences	34	23.8
Financial incentives to faculty to conduct curriculum development	20	14.0
Teaching load reductions	16	11.2
Funding for related faculty research	13	9.1
Other	8	5.6
We are not pursuing an integrated curriculum	21	14.7
Total	173	121.0

To what extent do you agree that, in the future, new faculty hires will need to be more cross-disciplined?

Response	Frequency	%
Strongly agree	43	30.9
Mildly agree	53	38.1
Neutral	23	16.5
Mildly disagree	15	10.8
Strongly disagree	5	3.6
Total	139	100.0

Note. Multiple responses were not allowed. AACSB = Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business International.

discussions of cross-disciplinary implications arising from current topic readings from popular business periodicals (51.0%) and invitation of guest speakers for interaction with business practitioners relating integrated business practices in their business (50.3%). Many schools achieved curricular integration by developing new courses or improving the method of delivery. Courses that developed critical thinking and interpersonal skills (48.3%), encouraged team teaching (44.0%), and ensured a consistent message—for example, teamwork, communication skills, and ethics—across the curriculum (44.0%) were also the focus of integration efforts. Other commonly adopted practices included the extensive use of cases within courses and business interactions through community service, mentoring, and internships.

Business schools adopted multiple methods to ensure curricular integration, with the average business school adopting six methods from those listed in Table 3. Further, the methods listed are not exclusive. Thus, the business

policy and strategy course could include the use of cases and guest speakers and could involve multidisciplinary teams that participate in live projects with local businesses. Another theme that arises from the data that we present is that most schools perceived that the objectives of curricular integration could be achieved through interaction with practitioners from outside academia. Note the use of guest speakers (50.3%); community service, mentoring, and internships (40.5%); and participation in live, multidisciplinary projects with local businesses (33.6%). Last, most business schools relied on the business policy and strategy course (59.4%) to achieve some measure of curricular integration, and that reliance should motivate the need for reviewing course content, hiring cross-discipline trained faculty, engaging in team teaching to supplement skills, and focusing on this course for assessment of student learning as part of the curriculum management process.

The importance of business core curriculum integration to the future success

TABLE 5. Assessment of Business Curriculum Integration*To what extent do you agree that curriculum integration can be effectively assessed?*

Response	Frequency	%
Strongly agree	34	24.3
Mildly agree	70	50.0
Neutral	27	19.3
Mildly disagree	9	6.4
Strongly disagree	0	0.0
Total	140	100.0

What direct measures are used to assess curriculum integration?

Response	Frequency	%
Performance in an integrative capstone course	64	44.7
Case analysis	52	36.4
Business plan	37	25.9
Graduation or exit exam	34	23.8
Traditional exams	34	23.8
Business simulation	29	20.3
Pretest and posttest	25	17.5
I don't know	21	14.7
Other	16	11.2
Total	312	218.2

What indirect measures are used to assess curriculum integration?

Response	Frequency	%
Senior exit survey	69	48.2
Alumni survey	55	38.5
Faculty discussion	54	37.8
Employer survey	45	31.5
Advisory board discussion	41	28.7
Student focus groups	41	28.7
Comparison with targeted levels of learning	33	23.1
Faculty level accountability through annual review	25	17.5
Bloom's taxonomy	23	16.1
Placement record	19	13.3
Recruitment of cross-disciplinary trained faculty	18	12.5
I don't know	17	11.9
Other	11	7.7
Total	451	315.4

Note. Multiple responses were allowed.

of students and the diverse methods used to integrate curriculum necessitate an assessment of the resources that business schools have committed to the process. Analysis of the resources that such schools have provided to support curricular integration is presented in Table 4. It is not surprising that the main factor that facilitated curricular integration was faculty commitment (42.7%). A relatively small number of universities (23.8%) had funded attendance at

AACSB conferences, and even fewer provided financial incentives (14.0%) or teaching load reductions (11.2%) to faculty pursuing integration initiatives. The fact that curriculum integration has not been more aggressively encouraged and supported with adequate resources is indeed surprising.

A large proportion of respondents (69.0%) believed that future faculty-hiring practices would need to consider the cross-disciplinary capabilities of new

hires. This finding showed a significant commitment to curriculum integration. Such changes in hiring practices may have implications for the recruitment and training of candidates at doctoral institutions.

Last, we also examined respondents' perceptions of their ability to assess the extent to which the curriculum had been integrated and the methods commonly adopted to conduct such an assessment. These results are presented in Table 5.

The information presented in Table 5 shows that most respondents (74.3%) believed that curriculum integration could be affectively assessed. Examining this issue in greater detail, we identified both direct and indirect measures of assessment. Our survey results indicated that performance in an integrative capstone course (44.7%) and case analysis (36.4%) were the most common direct techniques used in assessment of curriculum integration, and a senior exit survey (48.2%), an alumni survey (38.5%), and a faculty discussion (37.8%) were the most common indirect techniques used in assessment of curriculum integration. Institutions did not rely on only a single measure of assessment but on average used 2.18 direct and 3.15 indirect assessment techniques.

DISCUSSION

In this article, we examined the current status of efforts to make the business curriculum more relevant to the future success of business students by improving core business knowledge and providing a better understanding of the integrative nature of business organizations. Although prior research has outlined the need to integrate the curriculum and has described efforts made in this direction, we believe that the present study provides a comprehensive assessment of the current state of curricular integration.

Our results indicate that business schools have responded to the demands of various constituents and perceive curricular integration as an important issue. However, curricular integration is a costly and time-consuming process fraught with pitfalls. Many business schools have made little significant progress toward design, implementation, and assessment. Our analysis of the present results also

indicate that methods of integration and the point at which integration is introduced vary significantly across business schools. Despite the perceived need for curricular integration, relatively few resources have been committed to this activity. Last, respondents felt that curricular integration could be successfully assessed.

The results of our analysis are of interest to college administrators, faculty, and the business community. Specifically, data on the current state of curriculum integration, support for integration projects, and assessment methods provide administrators an understanding of how the process of curriculum integration has been managed at other institutions. This knowledge is useful to business school administrators considering curricular integration. Information regarding the use of alternative methods of integration is helpful to faculty who will be relied on to implement this change in curriculum. Specifically, faculty will be able to identify commonly used (and presumably successful) methods of integration easily. Finally, the results of this study provide information to the business community about the progress made by business schools toward providing students with a better idea of how businesses operate. This may motivate more cooperation between business schools and the business community to ensure successful implementation of the integrated curriculum concept.

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