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Curriculum Design

Putting the
Picture Together



The Year Ahead for AACSB

The Customizable Curriculum

Business schools meet the changing demands of both graduates and corporate recruiters by offering flexible curricula that allow students to personalize their degrees.

BY SHARON SHINN

A series of corporate scandals, the economic meltdown, and a rising chorus of voices criticizing the value of business education have compelled management educators to start re-evaluating individual courses and entire programs. Over the past five years, a number of major players—like Stanford, Berkeley, Columbia, and Wharton—have revised or completely overhauled their curricula, and the trend continues among business schools worldwide.

Overwhelmingly, schools are emphasizing flexibility in their revamped programs, encouraging students to take electives outside of the business school and tailor their degrees to their own personal interests. Says James Ellis, dean of the Marshall School of Business at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles, “We want to give students a chance to control their own destinies. There are certain things business students have to learn, like accounting and finance and marketing, but beyond that, they can take the ball and run with it. We’re out of the lockstep business and into the customization business.”

Schools cite several reasons for overhauling their curricula—the most important being that the corporate world has started demanding grads with a more well-rounded and integrated education. “The market has long been pushing for business students to receive more interdisciplinary education,” notes Stig Lanesskog, associate dean for MBA programs at the College of Business at the University of Illinois in Urbana-Champaign. A curriculum with a high number of electives almost inevitably leads to interdisciplinary learning experiences as students

combine business knowledge with an understanding of fields as diverse as engineering, biology, and film.

Schools also are revamping their programs because of changing needs and demographics among students. At the undergraduate level, says Ellis, “kids today are much broader in scope—they’re coming to us with more experience in community service and more high school classes that transfer as college credits. So they have more holes in their schedules that they can fill with other classes.”

At the EMBA level, a growing number of participants are

enrolling with a different sort of motivation than they might have had ten years ago, says Douglas Stayman, associate dean for MBA Programs and associate professor of marketing at Cornell University’s Johnson Graduate School of Management in Ithaca, New York. “Back then, more of them were fully sponsored by their companies and looking to improve their opportunities within their existing organizations,” he says. “Today, more are self-funded. While some are staying within their corporations, others are looking for new career opportunities. Our curriculum must meet their needs.”

The three business schools profiled here are among a growing number of schools that are implementing customizable curricula at all levels of their programs. In the process, they’re offering their students educational experiences that incorporate choice, flexibility, and opportunities to pursue interdisciplinary studies.

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The Augmented BBA

At the undergraduate level, USC’s Marshall School has dropped some required classes to allow students to take 60 percent more electives outside the business school. Students also are encouraged but not required to complete a nonbusiness minor. “Something like neurology or Chinese would really enhance that left-brain/right-brain thought process,” Ellis says.

To guide students through the potentially bewildering array of choices, Marshall has instituted mandatory advising for their first two years. In addition, the school has already laid out sample curricula on topics such as the business



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of television, the business of cinema, and how social media impact business, says Ellis. The USC system also allows students to pick their own courses, if other classes would better suit their particular dreams.

The overarching plan is to make sure business students mingle with those from other parts of the university, says Ellis. “That way, students hear not only the thoughts of the professor, but also of their classmates, especially those who have already been out on internships. In an entertainment class, for instance, a student might be able to say, ‘This is the way we did it at Disney.’”

Marshall also has introduced customization and flexibility in the graduate program. Students are encouraged to get required courses out of the way early, so they can focus on the electives that will shape their degrees, develop their leadership abilities, and help them land internships.

The Enhanced MBA

Cornell University has added more electives to its Executive MBA program, which has residency requirements at the beginning of each term and on alternating weekends. In the new format, which launched in 2010, the morning is filled with more traditional academic courses, while the afternoon is given over to shorter, more focused electives on topics such as honing oral communications skills, managing conflict, giving constructive feedback, and launching a startup business.

For a small, collaborative general management program that's accustomed to operating in lockstep, redesigning the program around customization is a big change. But, says Stayman, making this change was essential to help the school achieve three goals: meeting the needs of its increasingly diverse student body; allowing students to develop their personal skills; and providing students more flexibility in their course-

work to accommodate their different career aspirations.

One unplanned result has become one of the most attractive benefits, which is that flexible electives give first- and second-year students a chance to mingle with and learn from each other. In the past, because first-years took classes with their cohorts, and second-years with theirs, the students rarely interacted, even when they shared down time on campus. Finding time in the schedule for all students to take classes together has been challenging, Stayman notes, but definitely worth the headaches.

The Expanded MBA

At U of I, the MBA curriculum hasn't so much been redone as expanded. The core curriculum remains much the same, but second-year students are encouraged to take up to 16 hours of electives outside the business school. “We want students to experience

Globalization, Globalization, Globalization

Customization isn't the only element that's re-shaping the b-school curriculum. While an emphasis on globalization has been a trend so long that it's now practically a tradition, schools are finding new ways to amp up the international elements of their programs.

■ Cornell's Johnson School changed the global experience of its Executive MBA program into an international consulting project that requires students to work with outside clients to help them define and solve particular problems. Students go on-site to do their research, then return to write up their analyses and present recommendations to the client.

To facilitate this project, says Douglas Stayman, the school changed some of its programming, taking out courses like international finance and adding in classes on how to work with clients, how to manage projects, and how to develop analytical thinking and presentation skills. "We didn't just change the project, we changed the curriculum to support the project," he says.

■ USC's Marshall School also promotes global experiences, requiring graduate students to take overseas trips and strongly encouraging undergrads to do so. Students travel to cities such as Shanghai, Beijing, Hong Kong, Taipei, Tokyo, Singapore, and Mumbai. They visit with business leaders in those countries, meet with senior commercial officers from the U.S. embassy, go to factories, and experience the local culture.

James Ellis always hopes they'll have a chance to interact with local college students, perhaps going out with them at night. "Within a few years, we want to be able to say that 100 percent of our students have had a global experience," he says.

■ The University of Illinois has designed an international project-based experience for its MBAs. Students complete a project for a company doing business in India, China, or Brazil; they travel overseas for almost two weeks to conduct research before presenting their analyses to company executives. While not yet a formally required course, the project is strongly encouraged and its cost is included in tuition, says Stig Lanesskog.

He recently accompanied U of I students on two pilot courses for the MBA project experience, one in Mumbai and one in Beijing. He says, "Putting students in-country in the context of doing an actual project forces them to think about the country, the culture, and the market environment. It really brings to life everything they've learned in class."

all the strengths of the university and fill in any gaps they might see in their experience," says Lanesskog.

To help students navigate the bewildering number of choices available at a large public university, the business school has negotiated seats in 35 or 40 nonbusiness

classes that are likely to appeal to its students. These include places in the "Creativity, Innovation, and Vision" course offered by the College of Engineering; a commodities price analysis course offered by the College of Agricultural, Consumer, and Environmental Sciences; and human resources classes offered by

the School of Labor and Employment Relations.

The goal was to find topics that cut across many potential careers and give students a deeper grounding in areas like sustainability, innovation, and entrepreneurship, says Lanesskog. Students with strong ideas about their own customized schedules are welcome to contact other departments, or individual faculty, and make an arrangement to take other classes.

Lanesskog points out that the specialized electives don't constitute a double degree; they merely "give students a little depth in a certain area. They allow students to impact their own academic experiences and craft their own stories."

Overcoming Obstacles

Instituting any sweeping change comes with challenges and what Stayman calls "unintended consequences." While these school representatives feel that their new curricula have been implemented smoothly for the most part, there still were—and will continue to be—concerns to address:

■ *Getting faculty to pull together.* "Some are losing courses, some are gaining courses, and they all have to work together differently," Stayman points out. But he believes the Cornell redesign has actually promoted more cross-course coordination between faculty who have worked together closely to prepare electives.

■ *Helping students through the confusion.* Especially at big schools, students sometimes found it challenging to navigate the many choices and lay out a cohesive plan. At U of I, says Lanesskog, the school met that challenge by post-

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ing the list of pre-approved courses and helping students re-orient themselves to the new format. Ellis notes that it's essential to make sure advisors are prepared to walk students through the maze before the first day of registration.

“The leader of tomorrow is someone who can jump across boundaries and disciplines and analyze cultural and global differences.”

—James Ellis, USC

■ *Fine-tuning the execution.* All these schools are figuring out ways to make the experience better the next time around. For instance, Cornell wants to make sure that all students are signed up for their electives in a timely manner and that they receive the materials for their classes well in advance of

start date. The school also is looking at new kinds of technology that will improve the way advisors work remotely with students on global projects.

■ *Keeping the offerings fresh.* This will be an ongoing challenge

for program directors who expect to experiment constantly with the mix of electives. For instance, Marshall plans to add courses on topics such as data mining, family-owned businesses, and sustainability in emerging markets. Cornell is trying to determine what topics second-year students might be interested in

after they had their pick of classes in the first year. “Reviewing the electives will probably be an ongoing process,” Stayman says.

Changes Ahead

These school representatives expect to find more areas to tweak or completely redo in the coming months. “I’m a firm believer in continuous improvement,” says Stayman. “If you’re not trying to improve, you’re falling backward.”

The bottom line is that any curriculum redesign should have the singular goal of turning out graduates who are wholly prepared to succeed in the business world. Says Ellis, “The leader of tomorrow is someone who can effortlessly jump across boundaries and across disciplines—someone who understands how to analyze cultural and global differences.” A flexible, multidisciplinary curriculum is geared toward producing just that kind of leader.