

An Experience With A Faculty-Driven Approach To Business Curriculum Revision And Faculty Reorganization

Stephen J. Holoviak (E-mail: sjholo@ship.edu), Shippensburg University
Michael T. Marsh (E-mail: mtmars@ship.edu), Shippensburg University

Abstract

Technology issues, student feedback, faculty turnover, employers' needs, administration guidance, and AACSB recertification requirements combined to force the need for significant changes in the core business curriculum within the John L. Grove College of Business at Shippensburg University. College leadership approached both the identification of key issues and potential solutions with round-robin participation and consensus decision making by faculty rather than administrative edicts. Faculty "Town Meetings" were held regularly to discuss a wide range of issues, plan courses of actions, and design a new core curriculum. Faculty agreed to accept responsibility for the end products and ultimately made the final decisions regarding the content and structure of the core curriculum. This paper provides details of the processes, issues, problems, successes, lessons learned, and final results.

Introduction

The Total Quality (TQ) model had demonstrated success across both a broad array of organizations and across a broad time frame. With more than two decades of use in the United States, it has also demonstrated a high degree of staying power. It is the most globally used and accepted model popularized by its successes in both Japan and the United States. The success, resilience, and global acceptance of the model provide a solid empirical foundation that supports its application to the process of curricula change, modification, or reinvention.

It is important to realize that the goal was not to establish a TQ program but to use some of the accepted TQ methods and processes to examine, identify, and support curricula change. The continuous review of the business core curricula is a necessary part of the AACSB accreditation process. Accreditation, and for that matter re-affirmation, is partially based upon validation that a systematic process is in place to define, identify, measure, and make changes to the curriculum that is both in-place and on going. The philosophy of continuous improvement which underlies TQ, is an accepted systematic process of change and by definition an on-going process, as opposed to one-time event.

Irrespective of the "brand" name that is attached to a TQ system (i.e. Deming, Juran, Crosby) it has at its core two processes that are critical to a successful curriculum change effort in higher education: Round Robin Participation and Consensus Decision Making. (Koch and Fisher, 1998)

The process that both defines and empowers any total quality/continuous improvement system is consensus decision. With the consensus decision making format, it is the responsibility of both majority and minority viewpoint-holders to convince the "other side" of the feasibility, practicality, or validity of their course of action. Generally, they meet somewhere between or among their viewpoints with a better solution. The most commonly used decision heuristic, or decision "rule of thumb" is the 70% rule. Specifically, is the argument persuasive enough

Readers with comments or questions are encouraged to contact the authors via email.

to sway 70% of the “other” to go along with the proposed course of action? In all practicality, minor issues tend not to be decided by consensus, that is, consensus decision making paradigms are most useful for issues where support or “buy-in” is essential for success. Without the support, participation, and commitment of faculty from all business disciplines, business core curriculum change does not occur.

A Round Robin Brainstorming is the second TQ process to be used in curriculum change. Each person speaks in rotation. If one has nothing to say, then “pass” is a viable comment. This form of brainstorming is a way to insure that everyone has an opportunity to participate. The goal of the process is to expose all of the ideas, concerns, fears, trepidations, and visions. This will not happen unless we are able to get all people to participate. Clearly, it protects the reserved or quiet persons who may not normally speak. Yet it also protects the rogue thinker, the person who is constantly “out-of-the-bob” but may truly offer creative ideas and solutions.

Many people have trouble accepting that, as part of this brainstorming technique, there is to be no discussion of any of the proposed ideas until every person in the entire group has had an opportunity to offer ideas. This is extremely important. To comment on each person’s ideas as that person is speaking makes some people very hesitant about speaking on certain issues. When all ideas are recorded, typically facilitators use boards (black or white), flip charts or overheads, then an open dialogue about each idea can commence. Keeping to this structure enables us to detach people from ideas as well as giving participant’s time to think about the ideas and avoid reactions such as “that won’t work” or “we tried that before”. In fact, many participants, upon seeing the nature of the discussion, will comment on their own ideas, even to the point of saying that theirs would not work for a specific reason.

Because of the nature of TQ methodologies and the need to work to consensus, the TQ process is slow. However, the history of TQ does indicate that as soon as consensus and commitment are achieved, the implementation is both quick and positive, due to the extensive “buy-in” effort in achieving consensus. (Paulsen and Peseau, 1992)

The Issues

Technology issues, student feedback, faculty turnover, employers’ needs, administration guidance, and AACSB certification requirements combined to force the need for significant changes in the business core curriculum. The need to critically evaluate the current curriculum was not unexpected as the basic structure and content was twenty years old. See Figure 1. Six major business core issues were eventually identified and given a high priority for intervention. The business core:

1. Lacks integration among disciplines;
2. Does not integrate information technology adequately;
3. Has too many courses;
4. Has no logical starting point;
5. Lacks continuous improvement and
6. Arbitrarily distinguishes between upper and lower division courses.

All of the above-identified points were opened to the formation of a task team to work on identifying potential solutions. Task teams could be comprised of faculty, students, alumni, employers, and advisory board members or, for that matter, any stakeholder.

The initial team to be formed was structured to discuss and develop solutions for the “lack of a logical starting point” issue. Using the round robin brainstorming and consensus decision making techniques, the team was able to achieve consensus on developing a freshman experience for all business majors. A second task team worked with the issue of integration among the disciplines within the business core. A third task team was formulated to deal with the issue of “too many courses in the business core.”

These may appear to be rather small and insignificant to some, given that they took a year and one-half to achieve, still, it is important to realize that it had been 20+ years since changes to core had even been discussed by

the faculty. Equally important, the faculty as a whole, through the "Town Meeting" process, participated (although not 100%) and committed to changes in the business core curriculum. The faculty expressed commitment to:

1. Reducing the size of business core curriculum
2. Expanding integration of disciplines within business core curriculum; and
3. Incorporating a freshman (and maybe sophomore) business experience into the business core curriculum.

A Process for Change and Lessons Learned

The significance of the entire effort was not just the end product, a new core curriculum, but the validation of the processes, interactions, methodologies, and techniques used to create the end product. Listed below are the top ten "rules" that helped ensure a successful curriculum revision activity.

1. Even a process needs a process.

The first meetings took place at two or three week intervals at the beginning of the fall, 1999 semester. Only about one-third of the faculty participated initially and the interim dean acted as the facilitator. The interim dean acted as the facilitator for the first several Town Meetings because of his academic and consulting experience rather than position. He was a former faculty member in the College and already had a high level of credibility, trust, and respect among the faculty. The first several meetings were what might be called "feeling out" meetings and there were more questions asked than answered. The meeting formats were informal and unstructured except for a brief agenda distributed several days prior to the meetings. After the fourth meeting, some significant changes were evident – faculty participation increased to over 60% and one overarching discussion topic evolved. That discussion topic did not involve the curriculum but rather what process would be used to develop the curriculum and implement changes. It took nearly the entire 1999-2000 academic year just to develop a process that the participating faculty, approaching 80% by the end of the year, could agree upon. Little significant progress was made concerning the details of the new curriculum, however, and more importantly, the procedural and structural issues concerning the change process were agreed to by over 70% of the faculty present. The establishment of an agreement to the "rules of the game" was to become the single most important factor in developing the new curriculum with the concept of "Agreeing to Agree" as a cornerstone.

Also, during the first year, a number of task groups were formed to investigate some of the key issues relevant to a new core curriculum that were identified. Task teams were used to work on solutions to core curriculum problems identified in these Town Meetings and eventually given high priority. The task teams employed the TQ methodologies of brainstorming and consensus decision making and reported their solutions to the Town Meeting assembly for even wider consensus decision making.

2. Start early.

The major impetus for starting the curriculum evaluation process at the time was AACSCB recertification. Although not scheduled until 2005, the first year of self-study was 2000. Both the AACSB (re)certification procedures and curriculum revision have a long gestation period. If the College were to wait until told to take its first official action it would have likely been presented with a predetermined, structured framework. Little is more difficult than changing a published decision in a bureaucracy. A far better approach for our Town Meetings was to introduce ideas while the process was just being established and still liquid. Six years in advance is not too long to establish initial parameters for the processes and resources. We ensured that the plans and milestones were realistic, negotiated milestones with key constituencies, and published the plans and milestones prominently.

3. Feed the troops well.

It was evident early in the process that the "Town Meeting" approach would not work without maximum faculty participation. Scheduling the meetings during a time typically set aside for meetings, i.e. no classes scheduled, provided an opportunity for all faculty to attend. Pizza, sandwiches, soda, chips, and fresh fruit were

inducements that few faculty could resist. It was simple, relatively inexpensive, and it worked!

4. Faculty assumes full responsibility for success (or failure).

It is important that parties responsible for action items produce timely results to keep the process moving. A complete set of minutes of the meetings, with action items and due dates highlighted, was distributed as soon as possible after each meeting. Agenda for the next meeting was distributed no less than one week before the meeting and email reminders sent the day before the next meeting. A facilitator should not presume that everyone will come through or be available and have back-up plans that will keep the process moving forward.

A primary benefit of the long process to establish the process was that the faculty understood that the curriculum revision effort was theirs, as a group. The danger was that with so many individuals responsible, each must depend upon all the other players to do their job properly, thoroughly, and on time – spontaneously. Frequently, this is too much to ask of human nature, especially when faced with conflicting demands. (Olds and Miller) By utilizing the task team approach and TQ techniques discussed above, it was possible to unravel the maze of potential conflicts and gain a clear sense of direction and purpose. The facilitator(s) and task team leaders were successful in completing tasks by actively monitoring, guiding, eliciting, begging, cajoling, and extorting to achieve results. Sheer force of personality produced results where edicts, orders, and commands would not have.

5. Implicate everyone, surprise no one.

To have a successful process and product the faculty must not only accept but actively participate in the formulation of ideas and in the decision making process. Giving credit to the group for innovative and creative ideas, even if the concept was entirely one individual's was a trademark once trust had been established. Joint authorship and shared credit enhanced the process. It is surprising how much can be accomplished if one is not concerned about who gets the credit!

All documents were given the widest distribution. Minutes, key position papers, and other significant documents were forwarded as high up the administrative chain as prudent. Using email wherever possible is a good idea. It is easy to include attachments and info copies to all interested parties. In many systems it is possible to see when (or if) recipients opened the email. While it is useful to provide some level of documentation for most discussions, it is imperative that decisions and agreements have detailed documentation that receives the widest dissemination possible.

Timing can be critical where differing positions or viewpoints are involved. The advantage typically goes to the first argument espoused. If effectively presented it creates a mindset against which following positions are measured. Subsequent viewpoints must not only present their case but also refute the initial position. While satisfying, beating opposing opinions to the punch can be destructive. This effect was attenuated by “telegraphing our punches”, by being forthright and taking the time to personally inform the people most likely to object in advance. Three advantages followed: ideas were proofed by the harshest critics, willingness to go public prodded capitulation, and, when the shoe was on the other foot, the same courtesy was likely.

6. Devote management time to each issue.

There were far too many issues being researched and evaluated simultaneously for one individual to keep track of. However, leadership, both task team and facilitator, kept small problems from becoming crisis by reviewing the status of their areas of responsibility frequently, maintaining personal contact with key people regularly, and “hitting the road.” “Hitting the road” included participating on university wide committees that could impact decision (the University curriculum committee, for example), getting the views of customers (students, parents, companies), and courting support organizations (foundations, contributors, professional organizations). Much of this lesson learned can be summarized by: Initiate action! Get involved! Follow up! Follow up! Follow up!

7. Keep the process moving forward.

It was important to keep the process “moving forward” and “on task.” It proved easy to get bogged down in minutia during Town Meetings. Facilitators quickly became adept at striking a balance that allowed individuals a chance for expression but did not allow substantial digression into irrelevant or nonproductive topics and issues. Agreed-upon, published milestones, prompt distribution of agenda and minutes, and regular meetings went a long way in keeping the process moving forward. It proved advantageous to “shine a light in dark corners” for things left to themselves generally deteriorated into a seed for a crisis. Similarly, “casting the public spotlight” on progress had numerous positive effects. The mere perception of concerned observation produced a Hawthorne effect (Mayo, 1933) of greater proportion to the effort invested.

8. Have fun.

Making positive contributions to an effort as important as deciding what students will be taught, and hopefully learn, can be a challenge, but there is a great deal of satisfaction there for the taking. Faculty are intelligent and interesting, the process invigorating, and the project is definitely worthwhile. Faculty that participated with zest and vigor provided an infectious catalyst for others. It was important that some were not turned off. Those with passive interest were not be pushed far from familiar, comfortable ground. Innovations, while necessary, were also done sparingly so as not to threaten or confuse. Be confident that whenever the faculty-driven methodology discussed here is used, there will be a single individual or small group who is so committed to a single issue that no compromise, even for the greater good, is possible. Beware of these zealots for they can wreak havoc on the entire process. Handling them require patience, understanding of human nature, and a willingness to consider their opinions, while retaining the fortitude to keep moving forward. (Sherr and Lozier, 1996) Such people have definite place in higher education but perhaps not as key players in the curriculum development process.

9. Keep the well full.

A wide range of benefits resulted from active efforts to recognize contribution, publicly and in print, and to maintain personal contact with contributors. Support personnel such as secretaries and student assistants were not forgotten. It proved advantageous not to wait until the end of the project. Personal recognition may have been the most cost effective of all rewards. Colleagues that were well rewarded for recent effort are more likely and willing to exert extra efforts again. The value of personal notes was not overlooked – greeting and note card companies have created an entire industry on this concept.

10. Don't stop when “finished.”

Town Meetings continue to monitor the implementation of the new curriculum (Figure 2) in addition to embarking on other projects. A critical future issue is the continued assessment and evaluation of the new curriculum's effectiveness. It is anticipated that the question, “Is it working like we thought it would?,” will continue to be an agenda item at future Town Meetings.

The entire faculty will have an intimate association with the new curriculum since they will have to teach the courses in it and act as advisors to students taking courses in the curriculum. New courses will have to be developed, old courses will need revision to fit prerequisite flow, and some courses have already been eliminated. Concurrent with implementation of the new core curriculum was departmental reorganization. Any of these changes can be a difficult personal and professional adjustment for faculty. Since resources (faculty, college, university) are involved, higher level administrators necessarily provide guidance and direction. Regardless, the close association the faculty has had with the project provides a level of confidence and wealth of first hand information that appear to be making the transition remarkably trouble-free. Lessons, both beneficial and detrimental, continue to be identified quickly and their results projected ahead so corrections can be applied to the next academic year.

Conclusion

At this writing, the new business core curriculum is in the very early stages of implementation and its effectiveness will likely not be known for some time. However, active continuous improvement of the new core curriculum will ensure that graduates are better prepared, not just for the technical demands of their jobs, but for the interpersonal and cultural requirements of the contemporary workplace as well. (Preston, 1993) The TQ methodologies and faculty driven approach to curriculum development proved to be the correct approach for this College. This approach stresses strategy, informal association with a bureaucracy, and an appreciation for human motivation. The “rules” work, and work well, but like most management axioms, the concepts are less remarkable than the common sense, day-to-day academic administration. ☐

References

1. Koch, J.V. and Fisher, (1998) “Higher Education and Total Quality Management,” *Total Quality Management* 9/8, 659-668
2. Mayo, E., (1933) *The Human Problems of an Industrial Civilization* (New York: MacMillan)
3. Olds, Barbara M. and Ronald L. Miller, “A Faculty-Driven Quality Initiative at the Colorado School of Mines,” <http://fie.engrng.pitt.edu/fie95/2a3/2a35/2a35.htm>
4. Paulsen, Michael B. and Bruce A. Peseau, (1992) "A Practical Guide to Zero-Based Curriculum Review," *Innovative Higher Education*, 16/3, 211-221
5. Preston, L., (1993). “Coalition Building,” *Proceedings: Frontiers in Education*, 25-27
6. Sherr, Lawrence A. and G. Gregory Lozier, (1996) “Total Quality Management in Higher Education,” <http://web.umr.edu/~assess/tqm/tqmhed.html>, 1-8

FIGURE 1: Old Curriculum Flowchart

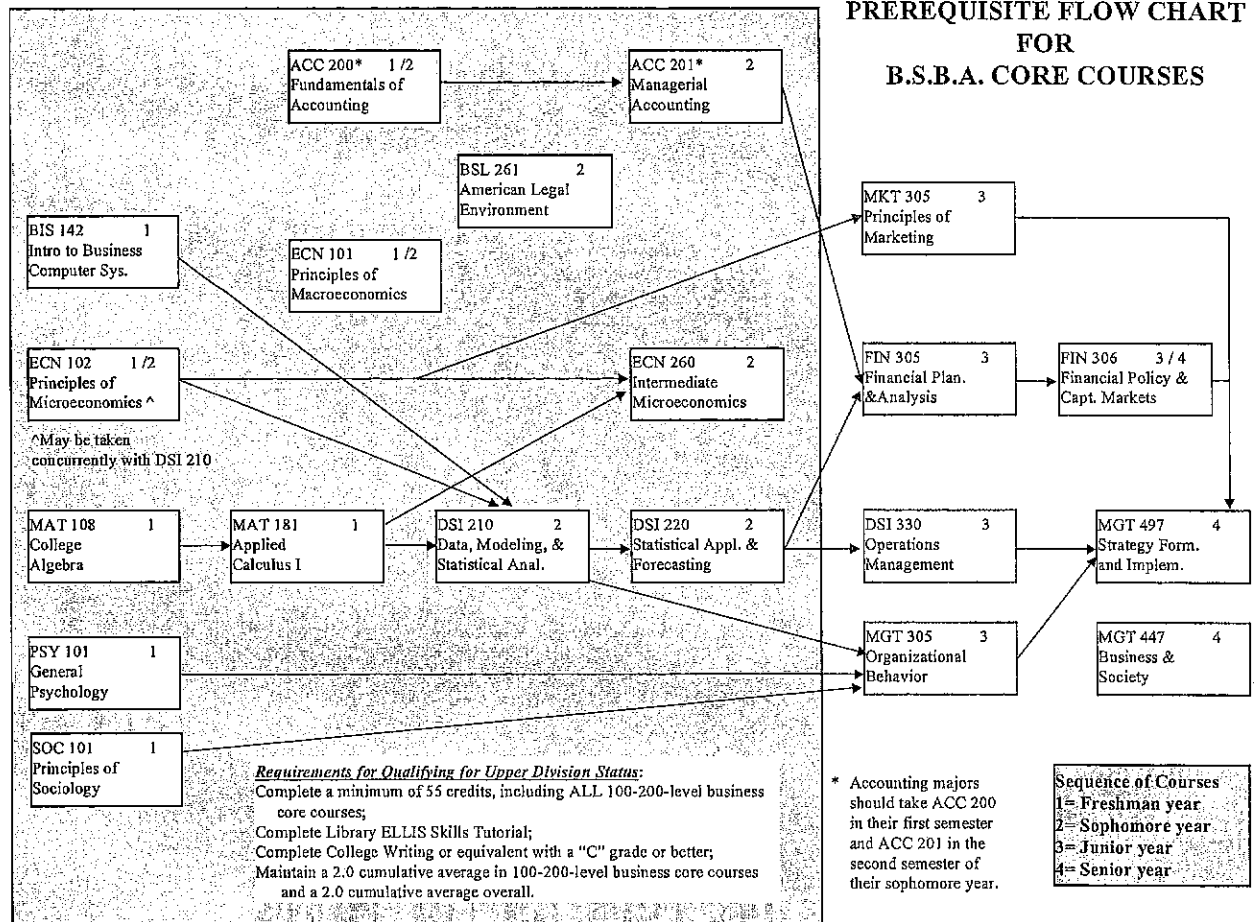
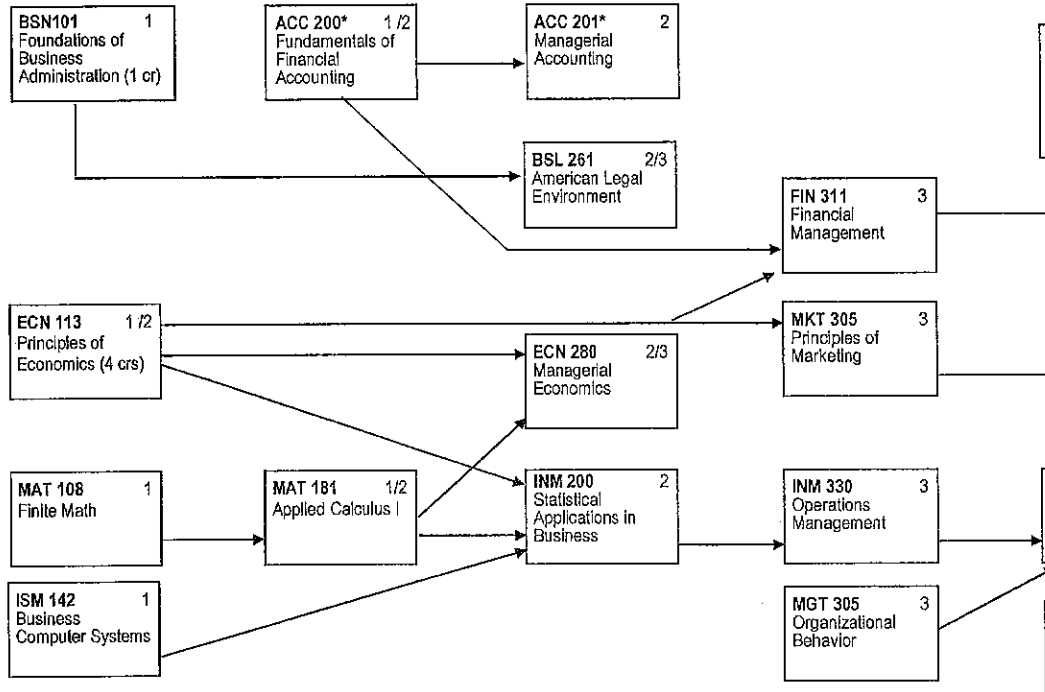


FIGURE 2: Revised Curriculum Flowchart

PREREQUISITE FLOW CHART FOR B.S.B.A. CORE COURSES



Requirements for Business Students:
 Complete College Writing or equivalent with a "C" grade or better;
 Maintain a 2.0 cumulative average in the business core, the major,
 and a 2.0 cumulative average overall.

* Accounting majors should take ACC 200 in their first semester and ACC 201 in the second semester of their sophomore year.