

Assessing the Business Capstone Course Through a Method Based on the SOTL and the Stakeholder Process

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The capstone course in most business schools has generally assumed both an integrative business approach and a strategic management perspective, whether it has been called Business Policy, Business Strategy and Policy, Strategic Management, or something else. Revised accreditation standards for business programs, adopted by the American Assembly of Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) and implemented in 1992, imposed new demands and standards on particular business programs and courses. These standards were based on the programs' unique institutional and college missions (AACSB, 1994). Recent drafts of possible new AACSB accreditation standards also have signaled more concern for assessment of actual student learning outcomes in the capstone and other business courses.

In light of these changing forces and expectations regarding student learning, faculty members in business schools are being asked to review and evaluate their capstone courses and make the changes necessary to meet changing environmental demands. Faced with this challenge, we developed and implemented a process to review the business capstone course at our institution. In addition to more traditional assessment methods, this process draws heavily from educational research focusing on the emerg-

ABSTRACT. The business capstone course—often called Business Policy, Business Strategy and Policy, or Strategic Management in many business schools in the United States—usually involves integrative and strategic learning objectives for students. In this article, the authors describe a theoretical foundation, an inquiry process, and an assessment framework for review and evaluation of such business capstone courses. Perspectives from the scholarship of teaching and learning (SOTL) and related concepts guided the authors in stakeholder networking activities. This effort raised assessment issues and questions that might be useful for other faculty members to consider in developing and reviewing capstone experiences for undergraduate business programs.

ing concept of a scholarship of teaching and learning (SOTL). Our assessment process also draws from the business literature exploring stakeholder theory and control theory. In this article, we present an overview of our multidimensional assessment framework, explore a number of challenges involved in assessing business capstone courses, and raise questions for future inquiry.

Approaches for Teaching Strategy/Policy

In developing an assessment framework, we began with a review of

instructional approaches to teaching the business capstone course. This review led to the discovery that a much more extensive body of literature on the instruction of the capstone business course existed than we had assumed.

Thomas (1998) summarized recent themes that business capstone courses have emphasized. One key theme is greater emphasis on global competitive strategy and industry dynamics. Liedtka and Rosenblum (1998) stressed that students need to develop and practice certain strategic modes of thinking more actively. Factors such as the increasing complexity and turbulence in many business environments as well as the greater diversity of student backgrounds and learning preferences are compounding the challenge of integrative, strategic thinking for students. The changing characteristics of students and the broader social and cultural context in which teaching and learning take place have led Menges, Weimer, and Associates (1996) to advocate that teaching be more student- and learning-centered. Other suggestions for capstone business courses have involved a greater focus on student diversity and particular skill development (Mu & Gnyawali, 2000; Nelson, Bass, & Vance, 1994; Prince, Helms, & Haynes, 1993); student imagination or creativity (Liedtka & Rosenblum, 1998; Peattie, 1990); stronger

connections to liberal education traditions (Decker, 1999); higher-order, paradoxical thinking (De Witt, 2000); and dialogues to help students become more critical, analytical, and flexible (Meyer, 2000).

Much of the continuing discussion related to capstone business courses has involved the review and evaluation of potential methods and tools used in these courses. Common approaches include more traditional lectures based on textbook chapter assignments, written or oral discussions of business cases, analyses of specific corporations or industries as term projects, and simulations and/or role-playing exercises that are computer-based and completed by teams of students. Many articles have appeared in the last decade on just the topic of introducing and comparing various computerized games or simulations for these courses (e.g., Wolfe, 1997).

Capstone Course Assessment Challenges

It seems obvious that excellence in teaching and learning should be a major objective in institutions of higher education. Assessment of teaching effectiveness is a common process for examining gaps between objectives and results as well as for generating plans for improvements. However, persistent problems arise in evaluating college teaching (McKeachie & Kaplan, 1996). For example, researchers such as Panici (1999) used adjectives such as “simplistic,” “primitive,” “sporadic,” and “inadequate” to characterize the assessment of undergraduate teaching.

Although assessment is critical for teaching excellence, Kraft (2000) traced many assessment deficiencies to deeper cognitive and relational characteristics found in academic cultures. One of the more significant issues associated with assessment is determining precisely what is being assessed. Is it a program, a course or course component, the teaching of a course, or student outcomes in a course? The issue is compounded further with the complexity of applying such levels of assessment.

Let us take, for example, the issue of assessing “student learning outcomes.” First, because there can be a variety of

outcomes, these outcomes must be clearly defined: Are they the sets of knowledge and skills that may be more directly or simply measured or aspects of student learning, confidence, and creativity that have less objective or quantitative measures?

Student outcomes could also be assessed in terms of “value added” knowledge or skills gained between a student’s entry into a program or course and its completion. Subsequently, this “value added” learning might be compared with that gained by students in benchmarked programs or courses at other institutions. For example, Jacobi, Astin, and Ayala (1987) recommended that institutions consider taking a “talent development” approach encompassing the period from student entry to exit rather than relying on more common reputational and resource-based assessments. Redmond (1998) urged that the number and types of assessment questions be dependent on the mission and goals of the institution, college, department, and program. Student outcomes might also be assessed through a wide variety of measures including final exams, course grades, scores on the graduate admission tests, competency assessment, performance evaluations, capstone course performance, senior theses, employer surveys, alumni surveys, external reviews, student exit interviews/surveys, and employment and graduate school placement rates.

Assessment of the capstone business course is a complex process that must be viewed from a multidimensional perspective. Critical concerns include the purposes, scope, and stages for undertaking assessment.

The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning

Over the last decade, a powerful approach called “the scholarship of teaching and learning” has emerged in the education literature for reconsidering excellence in teaching and learning. A review of this literature proved useful for us in developing a framework for assessing the business capstone course.

The “scholarship of teaching and learning” (SOTL) reform movement, according to Atkinson (2001), has the

potential to transform our society. Boyer (1990) is usually given credit for introducing the concept of the scholarship of teaching. He proposes four types of scholarship: discovery, integration, application, and teaching. Many authors have tried to apply this concept of a scholarship of teaching (Benjamin, 2000; Cross & Steadman, 1996; Edger-ton, Hutchings, & Quinlan, 1991; Healey, 2000; Kreber & Cranton, 1997; Menges & Weimer, 1996; Neary, 2001; Richlin, 1993; Schon, 1995).

Hutchings and Shulman (1999, p. 13) stated that the scholarship of teaching involves “practices of classroom assessment, evidence gathering, current ideas involvement and peer collaboration and review” as well as features of being public or community property, openness to critique and evaluation, construction that others can contribute and build on, and concern with inquiry on issues of student learning. Others have extended the concept of “scholarship of teaching” to focus more on actual learning and the role of students in the learning process. Menges et al. (1996) explored faculty and student roles in a learning process in which dialogues about experiences and views among students and faculty members occur naturally. Neary (2001) echoed this concern, advocating a shift in emphasis from the teacher’s efforts or even the student’s response to the quality of the developing relationship between the teacher and student.

Course-based approaches for developing SOTL have been advocated (Kreber, 1999), as have discipline-based approaches, such as Healey’s (2000) work in his discipline of geography. However, Kraft (2000) questioned faculty attentiveness to teaching and learning issues at the department or discipline levels in many institutions of higher learning. Though faculty communication does involve curricular issues, it rarely includes issues of teaching and learning. Kraft contended that, within our own departments and disciplines, we have barriers to honest and open exchanges about learning and therefore often find it easier to establish university-wide or crossdisciplinary forums on such issues to overcome some of these barriers within departments and disciplines.

Often associated with SOTL are efforts in universities to promote more faculty openness and cooperation in teaching/learning dialogues. Angelo and Cross (1993) have described interviews with groups of students and many other learning assessment techniques with varying purposes. The use of teaching portfolios for faculty assessment for SOTL has also been thoroughly discussed (Cohen, 1997). Bilimoria (1999) described the value of teaching portfolios in assessment of individual teaching philosophy and style, documentation of teaching experience and performance, and demonstration of forms of scholarship of teaching. Cerbin (1994, 1996) introduced a different kind of portfolio, a course portfolio, for encouraging goal setting and action research as ongoing inquiry and a continuous improvement process. Unlike teaching portfolios that often are employed by faculty members to demonstrate or promote the success of their teaching, a course portfolio documents faculty issues, challenges, and discoveries in the teaching and learning process of a particular course. The literature on SOTL also emphasizes collaborative efforts by faculty members to share information and perspectives (Hutchings, 1996). Universities and colleges have begun to establish teaching and learning centers for faculty. Faculty members interested in assessment and SOTL issues also have formed smaller, more intimate and supportive teaching circles, and some campuses have created newsletters and listservs that focus on teaching and learning issues.

The more important implications of SOTL for assessment of business capstone courses seem to include the following factors:

1. more public sharing of the factors that faculty members are planning, implementing, and assessing in courses and opening such assessment to stakeholder feedback;
2. greater concern for faculty-student relationships;
3. key linkages between student outcomes and instructional activities; and
4. creation of a continuing faculty commitment for inquiry, reflection, and

experimentation, beyond those periodic assessment demands imposed by others.

Stakeholder Theory and Control Theory in Developing an Assessment Framework

Given a variety of potential learning objectives and methods for capstone business courses, Thomas (1998) proposed that faculty members should identify these multiple objectives more thoroughly, assess potential methods for achieving them, consider contextual factors associated with the courses, and align multiple methods for the multiple objectives that have been identified. The capstone course in a disciplinary program has been identified as one way to assess outcomes for the whole program (Redmond, 1998). It can be viewed as a course that enhances, integrates, and applies earlier learning through a climactic experience. Successful completion of the course should demonstrate student acquisition of the knowledge, skills, and appreciations stated in the mission of the program. Given the integrative nature of the capstone course and the variety of relevant stakeholders, in developing our capstone course assessment framework we found it helpful to borrow from the concepts of stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984) and cybernetic or control theory (Weiner, 1948).

These theoretical perspectives proved useful to developing an assessment framework in several ways. First, the assessment process and its subsequent outcomes provide a feedback and control mechanism that benefits from the input of those who have a stake in both the processes and outcomes of the business capstone course. Second, these well-accepted management concepts suggest a responsibility to benchmark instructional objectives, methods, and outcomes with innovative and high-quality capstone learning experiences of other institutions. Finally, by increasing their voice in the course assessment process, relevant stakeholders can provide crucial information regarding gaps and deficiencies in course outcomes.

Considering calls by both Redmond (1998) and Thomas (1998) to use multiple assessment methods tied to the insti-

tutional mission, for our capstone course we turned to particular assessment methods that involved a diverse set of stakeholders in an active and open process of inquiry.

A Multidimensional Framework for Assessing the Business Capstone Course

Drawing from the SOTL literature and grounding our process in the belief that relevant stakeholders should provide key information for assessment of the capstone course, we developed a four-phase process to review the capstone experience.

Phase 1. Perspectives and Practices Elsewhere

The initial phase of the assessment process involved establishing appropriate standards or practices against which to compare our business capstone experience. This process of discovery took us in a number of significant directions.

First, a review of the literature on instructional methodology and tools for capstone business courses seemed an obvious starting point. This information led to a critical evaluation of course objectives, instructional methodology, and tools. Our institution has a distinctive public liberal arts mission; we are a member of the Coalition of Public Liberal Arts Colleges (COPLAC). In our initial efforts to establish comparisons for our program, we used COPLAC schools as the basis from which to draw data. Because our business school is accredited by AACSB, we chose first to compare ourselves with those COPLAC schools that have achieved AACSB accreditation. We contacted management department chairs and heads and capstone course faculty members and asked them to provide recent syllabi for the business capstone course. We received responses from eight business programs somewhat similar to our own in size, scope, and mission, and used an Internet search process to extend our review to capstone course syllabi from 20 other institutions.

In a further attempt to gain information on actual capstone course practices at other institutions, two of the authors

chaired a caucus on assessing the business capstone course at the national Academy of Management meeting in Washington, D.C. in August 2001. Ten or more faculty members attending the session described their individual instructional and assessment methods for capstone courses. Though anecdotal, this session provided useful inputs on capstone course assessment approaches that were not described in our literature review.

Phase 2. Institutional Faculty Perceptions and Curricular Concerns

If, as Redmond (1998) stated, successful completion of the business capstone course should demonstrate student acquisition of the knowledge, skills, and appreciations stated in objectives of earlier required business courses, then any assessment of the capstone course must consider these earlier classes. To help address this issue of assessing the cumulative and integrative nature of the capstone course, we turned to faculty members in our undergraduate business program who teach courses in what many business schools call the “common body of knowledge” (CBK). All students take these CBK courses. Faculty members teaching these CBK courses determined key knowledge and skills, which they expected students to retain from their courses and apply.

The purpose of this “upstream analysis” was twofold. First, we wanted to learn, beyond our initial assumptions, what other business faculty members considered core business knowledge and skills in their respective CBK courses. Second, this information helped us develop a clearer set of expectations as to what knowledge and skills might reasonably be expected from students entering the capstone course.

This analysis coincided with another assessment measure being developed in our business school. For many years, graduating seniors had been expected to take a senior exit exam. The purpose of this exam was to provide feedback on how well students grasped the knowledge that they were supposed to retain over their 4-year program. Though required of graduating students, the exam carried no conse-

quences, so students did not study for the exam; nor did many students appear to take it seriously. Thus, the exam was of very little value for assessing the knowledge that students retained from core business courses.

In cooperation with the undergraduate curriculum committee, we developed a new senior exit exam to identify key knowledge that a student in core courses might be expected to retain and apply in the capstone course. Seniors will be required to take the test prior to scheduling the capstone course and to pass it eventually in order to receive a degree from the school of business. The revised exam with its significant consequences should serve as a partial means of assessment for core business courses and better assure that students have the foundation to succeed in the capstone course.

Phase 3. Student Perceptions

Students are obvious stakeholders in any capstone course assessment process. Feedback on student satisfaction with the business capstone course was available from several sources, beyond conventional student evaluations of teaching. In an earlier program assessment effort in 1997, our institution established a benchmarking partnership that eventually included as many as 10 other business schools in Georgia. Student satisfaction surveys from graduating seniors were part of this overall benchmarking effort. These student surveys provided relative comparisons of courses commonly taught in participating business schools. This feedback, however, told us little about the effectiveness of our capstone course or about satisfaction levels that student experienced with specific aspects of teaching and learning in this capstone course.

As an adjunct to these broad-based student satisfaction data, we developed an instrument that focused on assessing student views of actual teaching and learning outcomes in the capstone course. Capstone business course faculty members at several other institutions shared assessment instruments used to evaluate capstone course learning. These instruments were adapted to fit the liberal arts interests of our institu-

tion and the course activities specific to our capstone experience. In addition to questions about general levels of satisfaction with certain aspects of the course, this instrument also focused on students’ perceptions of the level of CBK background knowledge and skills that they brought into the capstone experience. The survey also explored student views regarding the extent of application of that CBK knowledge and skills in capstone course activities and offered comparisons of such CBK applications and amount of overall student study and preparation for individual capstone course instructors.

Phase 4. Business Community Stakeholders

Continuing with the stakeholder approach, we queried area business executives and professionals who had hired or might be likely to hire our graduates to provide a “downstream” assessment of our students. Our business school dean has a business advisory council whose purpose is to provide support and advise or counsel faculty members and administrators. Using a computerized decision support system, this group of over 30 business and professional people formulated and prioritized a list of knowledge areas and work skills deemed critical to the success of a new business school graduate.

In reviewing this list, we learned that a vast majority of the professionals’ expectations were skill- or values-based rather than focused on disciplinary knowledge. In a subsequent meeting for initial data gathering, while working with faculty members who taught CBK courses, we developed a matrix to compare the knowledge-, skill-, and values-based expectations desired by these business leaders with those expectations that were currently being addressed in each CBK course. We shared this matrix with the business and professional advisors and received further comments and suggestions from them.

Continuing Assessment Challenges

A primary assessment challenge has been to determine the shifting focal

ground of this process. In a systems perspective, assessment responsibilities for the capstone experience do not lie solely with the capstone faculty members. Teaching issues and learning outcomes in the capstone course are significantly affected by the student's experience in the "upstream" CBK courses taught by a variety of faculty members in departments of the business school. Even farther "upstream," student success is significantly influenced by the academic experience of the student in the university "core" courses. Undertaking a fairly expansive assessment inquiry can pose as many questions as it can answer. Knowledge and skills identified by stakeholders as learning expectations may require more attention and practice than are possible in a single capstone course.

Which of the CBK courses might be expected to take on more of this early student preparation? Should strategic and integrative thinking and related skills be introduced earlier in the program and then be practiced and reinforced strongly in the capstone experience? Should there be a common integrative and strategic culminating experience for all business school graduates, regardless of their major, or might certain majors have a different capstone experience? How might changes in the capstone course suggest necessary changes in other business courses and experiences? Similar questions might be asked to relate learning outcomes for business graduates to the farther "upstream" impact of the university's core courses commonly taught in our liberal arts college.

These and other assessment questions involve both the history and emerging relationships among capstone course faculty and other key stakeholders. To what extent do capstone course faculty have the power and skills to propose and negotiate change recommendations, given that these changes will most likely affect business school administrators and other faculty members and perhaps even other colleges within the university? Can assessment efforts undertaken for the capstone course lead to similar or contrasting assessment efforts for all core business courses? The culture of university, the business school, and the personalities and skills of key faculty

members and administrators have both implicit and explicit influences on the development and scope of a continuing assessment process.

Conclusion

Assessment of business capstone courses can involve multiple and complex dimensions, and assessment objectives can shift as faculty members and administrators begin to explore and learn these dimensions. Through systemic perspectives and collaborative efforts, stakeholders can negotiate and construct assessment objectives and processes that focus on student learning outcomes and instructional and course and curricular effectiveness.

We hope that the theoretical foundation, inquiry process, and assessment framework presented in this article contribute to an increased emphasis on multidimensional and systemic assessment activities for business capstone experiences. Faculty members willing to ask fundamental questions concerning their instructional role and responsibility in student learning outcomes might benefit from developing an assessment process that shares some characteristics with the one that we have described.

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