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Management Education News from AACSB International

Assurance of Learning (AoL) is Tough to Perfect–But Your Students Will Thank You

At the end of the day, a business school's primary objective should be to prepare its students for successful careers in business and to positively contribute to society. This is why providing relevant curricula and vibrant learning experiences are essential. There also is a need to have curricula management that focuses on continuous improvement in order to ensure that student learning experiences are relevant, current, and reflect the needs of business.

Because it is critical to ensure that students are learning, the AACSB Assurance of Learning (AoL) accreditation standards (standards 15, 16, 18, 19, and 21) provide expectations for curricula management that assess student learning and support continuous improvement. These standards pay particular attention to the implementation of the outcomes assessment process—an evaluation of how well students are performing on the major, program-level learning goals. In all, the AoL standards create an outline of a process that begins with the development of student learning goals at the program level. These goals should answer the question:

What are the most important skills and knowledge that students should demonstrate at graduation based on the learning experiences offered within a given degree program?

The expectation is that business schools will have learning goals that address general knowledge and skills. The goals should also address management-specific knowledge and skills. For example, communications skills may be a general knowledge/skill that students must have (e.g., oral, written, technical report development, intergroup, etc.). An example of a learning goal that relates to communication skills may be:

- Students will demonstrate effective interpersonal communication skills in a team setting.

Once a school's learning goals are developed for each program, a review of curricula is essential to ensure that the goals are actually addressed within the learning environment. For example, if students are to demonstrate strong interpersonal communication skills in team settings, learning experiences that

include interpersonal communications outputs in the context of team projects would be expected to be found in a variety of courses. If a learning goal is identified that is not well addressed across the curriculum, clearly a curricula change is necessary to incorporate learning experiences that reinforce the established goals.

On the other hand, not every faculty member or academic course will address every learning goal. However, individual courses should be linked to the mission of the business school and collectively support the key learning goals of the degree program; as well as provide logical, integrative learning experiences for students. Student performance in individual courses is the responsibility of individual faculty members who deliver such classes. The business school should clearly demonstrate that its curricula reflect an integrated, systematic learning platform that addresses the needs to students in that particular discipline or major.

Once learning goals are established, each goal needs to be translated into learning objectives that become specific student performance expectations. These expectations should provide measurable, observable learning outcomes that can be used to assess aggregate student performance against the established learning goals. Once measurable learning objectives are selected, a measurement methodology should be established to determine how data will be collected and analyzed to assess student learning. The most popular approaches for directly assessing student learning are course-embedded measures based on student work that is produced as part of an existing class followed by stand-alone testing or performance measurements. Of course, direct measures of student learning outcomes may be complimented by indirect measures derived from alumni, graduating student, and employer surveys.

A key part of the outcomes assessment process is demonstrating that the data, once collected, is evaluated and used to improve program curricula. This "closing the loop" process is critical to the design and implementation of a successful AoL program—a significant, worthwhile endeavor. There may be a variety of methods to evaluate the data. For example, this portion of the assessment process can be managed by a faculty curriculum committee. This committee would gather assessment data and determine if collective student performance is meeting the expectations as outlined in the learning goals. Where performance does not meet expectations, actions should be taken to address the deficiencies. This follow-up is essential to continually improve the business school's curricula and programs to ensure mission fulfillment.

Figure 1. The Flow of Assurance of Learning
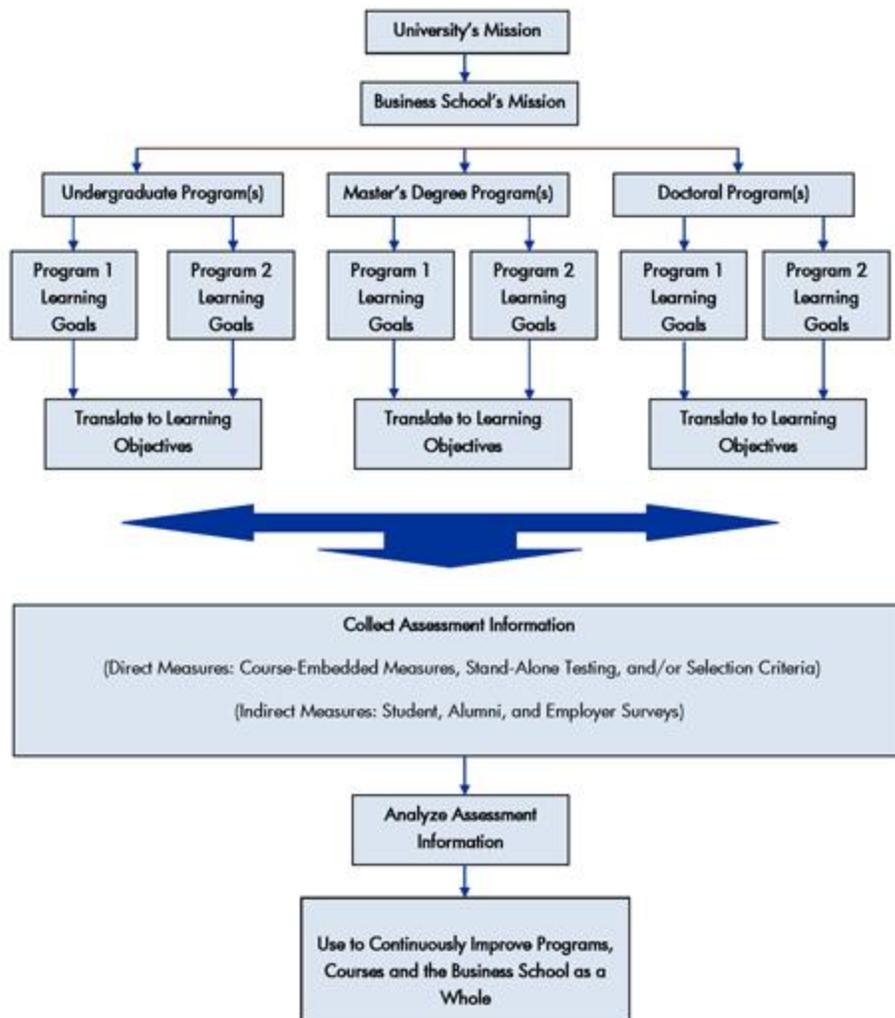
In the end, the AoL process should be driven by the business school's mission and reflect the collective thought of key stakeholders regarding the most important learning outcomes that should be demonstrated by the school's graduates. The goal is to have a curricula management process that links overall program learning goals to the mission. It should design course content and learning experiences that create an optimum learning environment for students. Ultimately, the entire process of AoL will benefit business students the most. An effective AoL process is challenging, however, the results are critical to addressing the demands of accountability and to driving curricula enhancements that support improving student performance.