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TEACHING ACCOUNTING INFORMATION SYSTEMS IN A PRACTICUM FORMAT

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ABSTRACT

Claremont McKenna College (CMC) initiated a formal program (the CMC Practicum Program) for the teaching of experiential learning courses in 1992. During the 1996-97 academic year, the author instituted a one-semester practicum course to assist accounting students in mastering the concepts of accounting information system (AIS) design. This article details both the challenges and advantages incurred in the development of this experiential learning course.

CMC PRACTICUM PROGRAM

Claremont McKenna College is a small liberal arts college (1,000 students) with a focus on training students for leadership in business, the professions and government. CMC is one of the five undergraduate colleges (including Pomona, Pitzer, Scripps, and Harvey Mudd colleges) and a graduate university that comprise the consortium of Claremont colleges.

In 1988, the Claremont colleges participated in the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation's New Liberal Arts program. This program aided the development of problem solving courses that were based on successful engineering clinics used at Harvey Mudd College (Remer, 1992). At the conclusion of the Sloan funding, CMC developed a program to provide similar learning experiences. A two-year grant from the James Irvine Foundation funded the development of the CMC Practicum Program. Students now have the opportunity to participate in real-world applications that are integrated in regular semester courses (Teeples and Wichman, 1997).

COURSE DESCRIPTION

The typical introductory course in AIS builds a foundation for the design and implementation of accounting information systems. The key concepts of an AIS course include database systems, AIS structure, internal control evaluation, and project control. Students usually gain exposure to these concepts with limited practice in homework problems or case studies.

This course, entitled "Information Technology and Accounting System Design", is the only course in AIS taught at CMC. Although the course is not limited to accounting majors, students need a strong background in either accounting (financial or managerial) or computer science (with at least introductory accounting).

Prior to the beginning of the semester, arrangements are made with a local business for the AIS class to help with the design and implementation of a new computerized accounting system. This service is provided without charge to the business. The business must provide all hardware and software required by the project. The business must also pick up all incidental costs, such as the production of procedures manuals, and must agree to work closely with the students and grant them sufficient time to learn the current system and to determine goals and objectives of management

The textbook used for the course is entitled *Core Concepts of Accounting Information Systems* (Moscove, et al., 1997) and was selected because it presents the basic concepts of AIS in a succinct and understandable form. Over the early weeks of the course, such topics as professionalism, interview techniques, and flowcharting are covered in preparation for the students meeting the client. An initial client visit is made to introduce the students to the business. After the on-site client visit, the students meet again to determine which accounting cycles will be crucial to the project. Each of the cycles become the basis for a project team. The number of students assigned to any team depends upon the complexity of the cycle.

In total, depending upon the complexity of the company's operations, a project requires between fifteen and twenty-five students.

Once project teams are formed, the balance of the semester is devoted primarily to the design and implementation of the accounting system for the client. The class will meet periodically to cover specific topics such as internal control design and integration of the various cycles. Some of these lectures involve outside consultants who are interested in participating in the project with the students. Rather than meet weekly as an entire class, teams meet on a weekly basis to report their progress and to identify and resolve problems. Teams produce weekly "action lists" and report on their results the following week. Approximately three weeks from the end of the semester, the class meets together again to learn about the cycles covered by other teams. Each team has approximately thirty minutes to teach the class about the intricacies of AIS design for their particular cycle.

The schedule calls for the design and implementation to be completed by the end of the twelfth week of class. This requires the entire project to be completed in a ten-week time frame. Completing the project by the end of the twelfth week allows a three to four week cushion (to the end of finals week) for the students to train employees, debug any software problems, handle client questions, and insure that the system is functioning properly. The final assignment due in the course is a formal presentation of the entire project. Invited are the management of the client firm, outside consulting firms (particularly those involved with the students), and faculty from the college.

CONCLUSIONS

Conducting a practicum course may have distinct advantages to the student, but there are numerous challenges that an instructor must resolve. A significant investment in time and effort is required to find and enlist the help of a suitable client (small enough to allow the project to fit the time constraints but large enough to provide control and design challenges.) Students must be closely monitored to ensure that final deadlines are met. The instructor must not only be confident in both systems design and consulting, but must also develop a sufficient expertise with the client's operations and with the accounting software to be a resource for the students. The instructor must meet weekly with the various teams to provide them with the core competencies required to move to the next step of the project. This can mean preparing and presenting five to six class sessions per week and being prepared to provide answers to very specific questions regarding various accounting cycles and the client.

Although success of the program is difficult to quantify, student evaluations have demonstrated overwhelming support for the class. The course has also been a significant factor in placing students in competitive positions. Out of the first class of seventeen students from the spring of 1997, eight students were recruited into consulting positions (five with Big-Five accounting firms. Of the remaining seven, five accepted positions with investment banking firms and two went directly into graduate school.

REFERENCES

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