

INTEGRATION OF PROFESSIONAL CERTIFICATIONS IN BUSINESS CURRICULA

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the paper is to showcase integration of professional certifications into business school curricula. The reasons for such integration and logistics of doing so are discussed based on the experience of a business school in a comprehensive liberal arts university in the Midwest. While the use of certifications in limited number of disciplines such as accounting is well accepted and established, this paper highlights and advocates systematic use of such certifications across the entire business curricula. The case for the use of certifications by business schools is presented from multiple stakeholders' perspectives.

INTRODUCTION

The call for business schools to better prepare their graduates for the professional business world is not new (Barker, 2010). It has become even more pronounced since the great recession. Some have called business schools to be ivory towers whose graduates are not career-ready. Many would prefer business education to be modeled after other professions such as law, engineering, nursing and medicine with validation of graduates' knowledge by independent external bodies (David & David, 2011, Keng Wan Ng, 2013).

Accreditation has become a well-established standard for the quality of business education. Accredited schools and programs proudly tout their accreditation to all stakeholders (Tullis & Camey, 2007). Accreditation bodies require business program to provide evidence of student learning. Business schools have adopted a variety of approaches for demonstrating Assurance of Learning (AoL), including both internally-developed and external assessment tools. External assessments typically include nationally normed competency exams (such as the Educational Testing Service Major Field Test (ETS MFT), and employer feedback on the performance of individual students (Jacobs & Pittenger, 2016). Many of these approaches primarily serve the purpose of the business program for curriculum improvement and accreditation, without many clear or direct benefits to other stakeholders such as students and employers. David & David (2011) examined 30 course syllabi in Business Management from AACSB accredited schools, followed by 30 conversations with management professors to assess management curricula's alignment with job training sought by corporations in their job postings. They also reviewed 20 textbooks and 100 resumes of graduates of these accredited schools. They concluded that the gap between business management curricula and business manager's needs, as identified by 28 management licenses and certifications required in job postings, is as wide as two decades ago. Hence, the call for having standardized external tests of graduates' knowledge and skills is not surprising (Fitzgerald). Advocacy and usage of industry certifications as an appropriate solution to the knowledge and practice gap in business education is on the rise (Keng Wan Ng, 2013, T+D, 2014).

LITERATURE REVIEW

There is an abundance of articles dealing with business education and industry-certifications in the database Business Source Complete. The articles that integrated business curricula with certification were usually limited to disciplines that already have this practice well established. For example, Coe & Delaney (2008) write about the importance of certifications in the discipline of accounting. Depending on the student's career plans, certifications such as CPA or CMA are available. Many accounting faculty members have these credentials themselves and are well versed in the requirements to guide their students. At many schools accounting curricula are designed to ensure that students will successfully pass the examinations required for a robust accounting career. Some accounting programs offer preparatory courses for academic credit while others guide students to available resources to increase the pass rate (Coe & Delaney, 2008). They highly advocate design of accounting curricula with specific certifications such as CMA in mind because it is beneficial to the students, employers and programs. They refer to CFO surveys to argue that

certifications provide a competitive advantage in the crowded job market to the students and are valuable in career advancement. They cite an IMA survey with evidence that students with certifications receive a higher average salary and higher average total compensation. To employers, certifications are a signal that the students have requisite skills and knowledge for the job. Programs benefit because specific certification can help develop a niche, provide opportunities for students and educators to connect with professional associations and can also provide access to tools, resources and information for the classroom. In accounting, certifications such as Certified Management Accountant (CMA), Certified Internal Auditor (CIA), Certified Fraud Examiner (CFE) and Certified Information Systems Auditor (CISA) are particularly desirable to employers. In light of multiple certification in a discipline, it is a challenge for curricula to discern which certification to incorporate into its curricula. The authors offer a list of questions to address in making such a decision.

The list of questions provided by Coe & Delaney (2008) can be useful because other disciplines such as supply chain management (SCM) have multiple certifications too. According to Natarajathinam & Sunkara (2018), the list of certifications offered by professional organizations such as APICS (now ASCM), CSCMP and ISM along with 40 universities is three pages long. There is also an emerging call to supplement supply chain curricula with industry certifications (McCrea, 2015). McCrea notes the laments of SCM professionals about the gap between education and real-world experience especially in the latest developments. Availability of such industry certifications in other business disciplines is prospering as well. For example, human resource management, hospitality management, finance, and management information systems, just to name a few, have well established industry-certifications. A call to integrate certifications across all key business disciplines has been made (David & David, 2011). Some of the questions that are emerging are: should these certifications be integrated into business curricula (Fundaburk, 2005) and if so, at which level (undergraduate or graduate) (Keng Wan Ng, 2013)? Should such an adoption be for each discipline/major to decide (Bacile, Cowley, Humphrey & Laverie, 2018) or should business schools comprehensively adopt them? What would be rewards and challenges for such integration? In the following sections, these issues are explored through the eyes of one business school in a Midwest based comprehensive liberal arts university.

A CASE STUDY

Ashland University is a mid-size private university in Ohio. The college of business and economics exists within the comprehensive liberal arts university. At large, Ashland University supports roughly 4,700 undergraduate and graduate students; Ashland hosts additional student offerings in external educational outlets. Of the traditionally enrolled population, the combined undergraduate and graduate populations in the college of business and economics represent roughly 21% of the total enrollment. The business school is accredited by ACBSP and is in the process of obtaining accreditation by AACSB International. As noted by Tullis & Camey (2007), our type of university and business school are in the most competitive higher-educational environment. To strengthen our competitive position in an ever tightening student pool, we have deployed multiple approaches, focusing on including innovation in our curricula. Almost two decades ago, the school had adopted the mission to provide a market driven education in line with the business industry needs. It is now the mission of the college of business to educate students in a comprehensive, innovative, and engaging environment. A mandatory internship program for all undergraduate business students in the Bachelor of Science in Business Administration degree regardless of their major had been implemented in 2008. To further enhance the placement of

**TABLE 1:
Certifications Integrated into the Undergraduate Business Curriculum at our school**

Major	Certification	Issuing Institute	Eligibility Requirements and Process For Completion
Accounting (5 year accelerated BSBA/MBA)	CPA	State Board of Accountancy	150 credit hours, exam (fee), background check
Marketing	AMA Digital Marketing eLearning Certificate	American Marketing Association	6 exams (fee), delivered through interactive modules
Hospitality Management	ManageFirst Certificate	National Restaurant Association	800 hours industry work experience, 4 Core Credential Topic exams (includes ServSafe) and 1 Foundation/Elective exam
Management Information Systems	Microsoft Office Specialist (MOS): Excel	Microsoft	exam (fee)

**TABLE 2:
Certifications Integrated into the MBA Curriculum at our school**

MBA Specialization	Certification	Issuing Institute	Eligibility Requirements and Process For Completion
Project Management	Certified Associate in Project Mgt. (CAPM)	Project Management Institute	HS diploma, 23 hours of project management education, exam (fee)
Project Management	Project Management Professional (PMP)	Project Management Institute	4-year degree, 4500 hours experience leading and directing projects, 35 hours of project mgt. education, exam (fee)
Blockchain (course)	Blockchain Essentials	IBM	exam
Accounting	Certified Management Accountant (CMA)	Institute of Management Accountants (IMA)	Bachelor's degree, 2 years work experience, 2 part exam (fee)

**TABLE 3
Certifications Currently Under Consideration or In Process for Future Integration:**

Academic Discipline	Certification	Issuing Institute	Eligibility Requirement	Process for approval
Finance (MBA Specialization)	Certified Financial Planner (CFP)	CFP Board	Bachelor's Degree, exam (fee), 4000-6000 hrs experience, background check	Need to gain accreditation by CFP Board for program
Insurance (undergraduate minor in Risk and Insurance)	Licenses in Life, Accident and Health; Property and Casualty	State licensing board	Pass state-approved courses, pass exam (fee)	Need to get course (s) approved by Ohio Dept. of Insurance
Finance (asset management track)	Bloomberg Market Concepts (BMC)	Bloomberg	pass exam (10 hour, self-paced e-learning)	must have Bloomberg terminal
Supply Chain Management	Certified in Production and Inventory Management (CPIM)	Association for Supply Chain Management (ASCM) (APICS)	pass 5 exams (fee)	review curriculum
Human Resource Management (MBA Specialization)	SHRM Certified Professional	Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM)	HR-related Bachelors Degree, 500 hours work experience, exam (fee)	Need to get program approved by SHRM's Academic Initiatives

students at the graduate and undergraduate levels, we initiated the process of incorporation of industry-certifications well matched with our majors in 2017. The innovative design, expansion, and implementation of the MBA program and its course offerings were influential in the success and growth of Ashland's college of business and economics. Table 1-3 provide a list of certifications that have been incorporated into undergraduate and MBA degrees respectively and the certification that are under consideration currently as the process unfolds.

PROCESS FOR IMPLEMENTATION

The initiative at our school was led by the academic leadership - Dean, Associate Dean and the Department Chairs. The Dean's Council (the College's leadership team) embraced the idea of certification integration as one initiative to pursue in an effort to enhance the competitive position of the school. In the literature search noted previously, threats to business education (Tullis & Camey, 2007) are commonly noted. Recommendations to incorporate industry-certification across business curricula are increasing (David & David, 2011), but no article was found that offered suggestions for the execution of this strategy at the college level. In light of the change management literature, a strong lead by the top management would be logical. At our school, at the encouragement of the dean when the department chairs unanimously adopted the initiative to incorporate certification, the next logical step was to identify appropriate certifications for each major.

Every department chair was tasked to identify one exam for each major and recommend to the Dean's Council, how it could be built into their program and identify any financial issues/implications. A list of potential certifications for each major was compiled. To add a certification to the list, the questions considered were: cost, frequency of usage of the certification by other schools and employers, ability to incorporate into curricula, tie with the school's mission and coordination effort with other entities required. Tables 1-3 provide the certificates that have been identified and either have been incorporated and or are in the process of being incorporated. Adding industry credentials and certifications to minors curriculum and stand-alone sections provided additional course offerings to students that addressed industry demands.

During the process of identifying certifications that matched the mission, some gaps in the curricula surfaced. In light of industry certifications considerations at the time, programs were designed to address the curricula needs and industry desires. In the academic year 2018-2019, a major in manufacturing and minors in risk management and pre-law were designed and put through the approval process. The manufacturing major also required establishment of partnership with a regional state school. To accomplish these tasks, key faculty took lead in the curricula design and approval process in addition to finding partnership institution.

LESSONS LEARNED

We are at the midway mark in our implementation with four certifications in place at the undergraduate level and at the graduate level. We are working to implement five additional certification options over the next two years. Our goal is to have 100% of our graduates to have at least one certification by the time they graduate. A similar hope is true for certification integration into all MBA Specializations. Upon initial review of the innovative concept, specific undergraduate and graduate sections had logical launching points. We started via the path of least resistance. Once fully developed, these certification contributions created a framework for future integrations. The ability to develop MBA courses and sections, as well as create new MBA specializations, allowed us to expand our academic offerings. Similarly, the exploration of industry certifications expanded our undergraduate catalogue as well. The MBA program served as a pilot program for industry certifications in many ways, and will continue to integrate new certification options to developed specialization curricula. While we work to collect data as the implementation and impact of these certifications unfolds, our observations highlight some lessons.

First, certifications are not simply add-ons to existing business curricula if the goal is to assist students in obtaining a certification prior to graduation. The certification can be fully integrated into a major, minor, or graduate specialization. Therefore, a review of the existing business curricula is a must. Second, faculty buy-in is a necessary but not sufficient condition. Curricula is faculty's domain. No gaps identified in the review can be closed without the cooperation and assistance of the respective faculty. Third, review of business curricula may identify a need for partnerships with other entities both inside and outside the university in which the business school is located. For these partnerships to materialize, the roles of college and university level administration are crucial. Fourth, key faculty-champions can make the process efficient. In our case, a faculty member in the department of management took the lead for the design and approval of manufacturing major. He had industry background in manufacturing which aligned his expertise and interests. Similarly, for the pre-law minor, faculty with J.D's were heavily involved. Fifth, the process requires realignment of resources. Additional resources would be better but many smaller schools, such as ours, do not have an abundance of new resources. To minimize our need for additional faculty, we aligned the closing of identified gaps using the talents and qualifications of our existing faculty. We chose to partner with a state school to secure resources that we did not have on our campus. Finally, the incorporation of certification into curricula is a time-consuming and multiple stage process. The schools will need to have a longer perspective and not see certifications as a quick fix.

SUMMARY

The calls for business schools to close the gap between their educational outcomes and industry's needs are growing. Smaller private schools currently exist in a hyper competitive education environment and cannot ignore such calls. Industry certifications are one approach to closing the gap and this approach is gaining favor among key stakeholders. We have highlighted the case of one school to showcase the journey other schools can undertake if they pursue the approach.

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