

COURSE COORDINATION: A MAINSTAY IN ACCOUNTING EDUCATION

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INTRODUCTION

Coordination of multi-section courses offers educators a mechanism for providing consistent learning experiences to all students in all sections of the same course. Consistency across sections ensures that all graduates are taught the same core competencies. While course coordination has long been a topic of interest in higher education, the process may be even more relevant today due to assessment priorities, resource constraints, recruiting and retention efforts, varying delivery methods, and other related issues. This paper presents a model of the course coordination process that includes three stages: planning, implementation, and evaluation. At each stage of the coordination process, best practices can be employed to make the coordination process beneficial to all stakeholders: faculty, students, and programs.

Calls for greater accountability at all levels of higher education have colleges and universities searching for methods of ensuring that their courses and programs are designed to achieve maximum effectiveness. Educators are constantly seeking practices that offer the greatest likelihood that students have quality learning experiences in their courses. Inherent in the concept of quality is the idea that students across all sections of a particular course should receive the same content and same opportunity to learn.

Academicians have determined that required courses help build an essential common body of knowledge. Consequently, a required Accounting Principles course from one instructor in one delivery format should have essentially the same content as Accounting Principles from another instructor in the same or different delivery format. Similarly, many would argue that students across all sections of the same course should have similar access to supplemental instructional resources that facilitate their learning. And finally, some might contend that the same level of performance by two students in different sections of the same course should be rewarded with the same course grade.

The extent to which faculty members agree with these propositions will vary from institution to institution. Educators can debate the appropriate degree of consistency across multi-section courses, but a fundamental question remains apparent. How can teachers ensure that learning goals are being achieved if they cannot demonstrate that multi-section courses offer the same content and opportunity to learn? While an instructor's best professional discretion regarding how to enhance learning in his/her course should always remain paramount, some level of course coordination can frequently help ensure that students have an equal opportunity to learn.

WHAT IS COURSE COORDINATION?

Course coordination is a collaborative process of planning, implementing, and evaluating course policies and instructional activities designed to enhance learning across all sections of a course. It is important to note that coordination *does not* entail imposing instructional methods and deliveries on selected courses from a central authority. The ideal course coordination process will rely exclusively on communication and consensus building among the participating instructors.

WHY COORDINATE MULTISECTION COURSES?

The arguments for course coordination in multi-section courses appear in both subject specific literature such as information technology (Dettori and Settle, 2004; 2005) and engineering (Sathianathan, 1997), as well as general program design discussions (Georgia State University, 1992; South Dakota Board of Regents, 2004). In accounting, the merits of course coordination have been advanced for decades (Abdelsamad & Sperry, 1974; Mead and Ruswinckel, 1959; Van Voorhis, 1955; Paul, 1942). The following is perhaps one of the more succinct statements making the case for course coordination:

“That nearly all such programs of study...have a specific list of core courses which are to be taken suggests that the program is not a set of miscellaneous marginally-related courses. In order to assure that the topics comprised in the program of study are covered, course objectives must be determined for the program and *consistency among sections of a core course must occur*” (Georgia State University, 1992) (emphasis added).

Course coordination can yield benefits for students, faculty, and academic programs. Among the student benefits the authors have observed in their courses, several of which are addressed in the writings noted above, are: (1) a greater sense of fairness; (2) higher student satisfaction; (3) better class attendance; (4) a higher retention rate; and (5) an opportunity for students absent from one section of a course to attend another section. While other factors may have had an impact on student gains, student comments suggest that coordination is one strong reason for the improvements.

Additional benefits of coordination have an impact on faculty perceptions and/or performance. Some of the faculty benefits observed at the authors' university include: (1) serving as a road map for teaching assistants, adjuncts, and instructors; (2) “pulling along” instructors who may be slow to embrace change in areas such as technology and/or new instructional methods; and (3) facilitating course coverage during faculty absences. The coordination process serves as an enabling mechanism for some faculty and a forum for others to share new technologies and instructional methods.

Still other aspects of coordination have the potential to positively impact academic units and programs. Some of the program benefits observed by the authors include (1) assuring consistent coverage of material; (2) infusing a wide range of ideas into coordinated courses; (3) balancing enrollments across sections; and (4) enhancing program assessment activities. Consistent learning goals and methods to achieve these goals across sections allow departments to assess learning that occurs in a course irrespective of the section, instructional or delivery method, or instructor.

A MODEL FOR COURSE COORDINATION

The key to maximizing the benefits of course coordination is employing best practices at each stage of the coordination process. At the authors' university, a midsize public university in

the Midwest, the coordination process entails three stages: (1) planning, (2) implementation, and (3) evaluation. By approaching course coordination as a three-stage, interactive process, the accounting department has achieved enhanced results for students, faculty, and programs.

Planning Stage

The planning stage is the initial stage of course coordination where the level of coordination is determined and numerous other related decisions are made. Coordination levels can range from highly coordinated, where each section is virtually identical to others, to lesser degrees of coordination where sections may only share learning goals. During the planning stage, a consensus on common learning goals (an essential first step) should be developed. Then, instructional methods and delivery mediums should be discussed and the level of consistency of instructional activities and resources across sections determined.

The planning stage of course coordination offers many opportunities to engage each of the participating instructors. Multiple people generate multiple ideas for the course. These ideas may result in bringing new delivery methods to the classroom, incorporating innovative assignments into the course, or infusing technology into the delivery. During the planning stage the coordinator and participating instructors should discuss any division of course duties. For example, exam preparation may be rotated among instructors, or this task as well as others may rest solely with the course coordinator.

From adjuncts and teaching assistants to the more experienced professors, all participants can benefit from the planning stage of course coordination. For the less experienced instructor, the planning stage offers a “road map” for the course, with extra assistance made available as needed. For the more experienced instructor, the planning stage may offer a template for trying new teaching methods or a means of sharing ideas and methods with other instructors.

Implementation Stage

The implementation stage of course coordination is where the course plan is operationalized. First, the same course content is covered across all sections according to the course schedule. By sharing the same course schedule, absences of both students and faculty are more easily addressed. Second, continuous faculty interaction during the implementation stage helps ensure that coordinated courses proceed smoothly for both students and faculty. Brief periodic instructors’ meetings help address issues as they arise and facilitate making any necessary mid-course changes. The sharing of resources such as handouts, examples, cases, and technology tips helps build cohesiveness among participating instructors. Concerns expressed by students can be discussed and, where appropriate, remedial actions taken across all sections.

Third, coordinated courses may be implemented across sections utilizing similar instructional methods, such as lecture, slide presentation, problem solving, etc., or with differing methods. Factors such as class size, frequency of class sessions, instructor preferences, and/or student demographics may impact this decision. Delivery of instruction using distance technology such as video conferencing, interactive television, and online formats will also directly impact selected instructional methodologies. By keeping the focus on facilitating learning across all sections and achieving common learning goals, coordinated courses may be

successfully implemented even with substantial differences in instructional methods and delivery mediums.

Evaluation Stage

The evaluation stage is the final stage of course coordination where both the planning and implementation processes are assessed. Much like the implementation stage, this stage entails on-going discussions among participating instructors. Instructors can make adjustments in assignments, delivery methods, and/or resources, as deemed necessary. Central to every discussion among instructors during the course term should be questions like, “Are we accomplishing our learning goals?” and “Are changes needed?” Course evaluations by students can also be used to elicit input regarding the coordination process. Student perceptions related to fairness, performance, and satisfaction can be measured to aid in the evaluation stage of course coordination.

The evaluation stage of course coordination can also enhance the assessment or evaluation of programs according to AACSB-International and regional accreditation agencies (Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools, etc.) standards. In the case of AACSB-International, coordination of core courses assists the department and college in documenting that learning goals are established and achieved across multiple sections of the same course, thereby assuring the impact of curricula on learning. For regional accrediting bodies, coordination of core courses aids the department, college, and university in documenting that all graduates have had the same opportunity to learn and have attained core competencies.

CONCLUSIONS

Approaching course coordination as a collaborative three-stage process enhances the probability for successful implementation of a coordinated course. Each of the three stages (planning, implementation, and evaluation) provides opportunities to make refinements and improvements in the process, enabling coordination to become both an effective and efficient approach to offering multi-section business courses.

Course coordination does not and should not impose a “one size fits all” mentality. It should only be employed to the extent that learning and consistency of coverage are facilitated. Constant interaction among involved parties and an environment at both the department and college levels that fosters course coordination are strong determinants of success. Assessment activities required by both AACSB and general accrediting bodies can be facilitated by utilizing various activities that are often an integral part of the course coordination process.

Finally, course coordination is certainly not a new concept. Many of the activities mentioned in this discussion might seem like everyday, routine practices to some and perhaps restrictive to others. However, the relatively few recent discussions in the business education literature of the value of course coordination at a time when universities face resource constraints, assessment priorities, and recruiting and retention mandates suggest that greater exploration of the merits of this process may be warranted.

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