

## I Cross Trainers

In today's business environment, *cross-functionality* isn't a buzzword; it's a requirement. In a 2006 senior management survey on innovation, *BusinessWeek* and the Boston Consulting Group named the lack of coordination across functions as the second-biggest barrier to innovation. In her *BusinessWeek* article, "The World's Most Innovative Companies," author Jena McGregor noted that "collaboration requires much more than paying lip service to breaking down silos. The best innovators reroute reporting lines and create physical spaces for collaboration. They team up people from across the org chart and link rewards to innovation." Her point was that successful companies foster innovation specifically because they promote cross-functionality.

Most business school deans will claim that their schools recognize the need for interdisciplinary training. If asked how cross-functionality is built into their curricula, they'll probably say that the issue is covered in an introductory class and the capstone strategy course. Yet anyone who reviews textbooks and course material for these classes will have a hard time determining how the schools approach cross-functional teaching and learning—particularly for undergraduates. In fact, I recently conducted a study that showed that business schools have made efforts to integrate disciplines across functions in their MBA programs, but they have done little along these lines for BBAs.

Could it be that—even armed with the knowledge that businesses are run horizontally—business schools still educate undergraduate

students vertically? Does that mean our students will be unprepared to adapt to the changing needs of organizations? Does that mean our graduates will not have the interdisciplinary skills that will allow them to recognize and pursue innovation in the workplace?

Writing in the *Harvard Business Review* in 1984, Jack Behrman and Richard Levin suggested that real-world business problems "do not yield to a single-discipline solution." More than 20 years later, have our business schools gotten any better at designing cross-functionality into the curriculum? Or have they just gotten better at making excuses for why they haven't?

Through various teaching-related projects, informal discussions, and intensive reviews of cross-functional scholarship, I have identified what I call "The Top Five Excuses for Acknowledging the Need for Cross-Functional Education But Not Actually Doing It."

### **Excuse No. 5: Business schools are organized functionally.**

Organizational structure has long been blamed for the lack of interdisciplinary integration. This functional division of labor dates back to the late 1700s and has common-sense appeal. That is, functional experts tackle vertical activities for which they are trained as specialists. Because the program is organized around academic departments, the curriculum tends to be segregated by function instead of integrated across disciplines. This excuse is actually reinforced by numerous external organizations that not only rank graduate and undergraduate programs, but also rank the top departments within specific functions.

### **Excuse No. 4: Faculty lack cross-functional training.**

In 2002, AACSB's Management Education Task Force put together a report called "Management Education at Risk," which acknowledged that business schools face real challenges when they try to blur the boundaries between educational disciplines. Even so, the report emphasized the need for "doctoral graduates from programs outside the traditional advanced theoretical research category." Yet anyone who's ever recruited faculty knows that candidates are rarely reviewed with respect to their cross-functional expertise.

Some educators believe that cross-functional initiatives will be launched only by teams of clinical professors and experienced lecturers working in tandem. If that's true, are business schools acknowledging the importance of these teaching teams? Or do tenure-track faculty regard co-taught courses as insignificant?

### **Excuse No. 3: The curriculum has always been functionally specialized.**

Historically, most business school curricula have encouraged specialization by discipline, and it hasn't proved easy to revamp them. Department chairs say that they try to keep their functional courses up-to-date, but many of them do not report intriguing new cross-functional courses or benchmarking studies that examine education efforts that reach across silos. Some faculty members feel they've achieved cross-functional integration merely because they encourage students to take concentrations in multiple disciplines. However, that leaves it to students to discover the



linkages across concentrations—and usually they're not even allowed to study the subjects simultaneously in one classroom!

**Excuse No. 2: We lack the necessary teaching resources.**

Any discussion on this topic ultimately gets to the nitty-gritty of undergraduate teaching materials. Few textbooks focus even marginally on cross-functional issues, and cases that truly examine such issues are rarely available. Schools that want to emphasize cross-functional education would need to ask their professors to take on an increased workload, but it often seems that most professors would rather complain that the necessary materials are not available than do the work of creating them. This leads me directly to the No. 1 reason business schools do not offer interdisciplinary curricula.

**Excuse No. 1: There is no reward for cross-functional teaching efforts.**

This excuse strikes at the heart of many prominent business schools because it forces administrators to consider what the university's priorities are in terms of teaching and learning. Creating and implementing a truly cross-functional program requires tremendous time and energy, and administration has to

be willing to pay the price. Interdisciplinary teaching and learning fall clearly in the domain of educational scholarship. As long as the faculty evaluation process fails to reward educational work as a scholarly contribution, business school faculty will not rise above any of the excuses noted here. What is their incentive?

I suppose we shouldn't condemn business schools too harshly, since many corporations also fail at innovation. In a 2006 *BusinessWeek* article by Michael Arndt, Whirlpool CEO Jeff M. Fettig said, "We knew from a strategic view what we needed to do, but from a practical point of view we didn't know how to do it at all." However, Whirlpool figured out how to innovate, and now companies such as Hewlett-Packard, Nokia, and Procter & Gamble benchmark their innovations against Whirlpool. Shouldn't more business schools conquer the "how" of cross-functional teaching so they can nurture graduates who understand innovation?

As evidenced by the lack of it, cross-functional teaching is not easy to integrate into the curricula of business schools. However, if business educators are to foster innovation, we have to denounce the excuses and take action. Many players could have a role in fixing the situation:

■ Accrediting agencies could bring the need for cross-functionality to the forefront in their assessment of programs. If nothing else, this would force business schools to examine their curricula and determine how many opportunities they offer for interdisciplinary courses. It would also cause schools to consider where such courses could fit into their programs.

■ Publishers of the business school rankings could measure how well

schools integrate programs across disciplines. If business schools are ranked on how well they integrate cross-functional education, deans will do more than pay lip service to the idea.

■ Academic associations could add cross-functional tracks to conference programs and facilitate interdisciplinary teaching groups.

■ Journals could designate one of their editors as the "cross-functional associate editor," the way they designate associate editors in functional disciplines.

■ Finally, business schools themselves could recognize and reward interdisciplinary teaching. Schools award grants and recognition to faculty who use technology creatively in the classroom. Why is demonstrating technological prowess more important than teaching students to understand the cross-functional nature of business?

If business schools do not learn how to educate across disciplines, how can we turn out graduates who understand that innovation is critical to success? A recent reviewer of a teaching proposal called cross-functional teaching a "30-year-old pipe dream." One of my admired colleagues phrased it even more bleakly, saying that the business academic discipline has deconstructed itself in the finest tradition of post-modernism, so that now faculty members are less cross-functional than ever. I hope both of them are wrong. And I believe that—if we all work together to overcome our excuses—we can make the cross-functional classroom a vital part of business education. ■

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