

## Curriculum Innovation as Continuous Improvement

---



**By Steven C. Currall, Ph.D.**  
**Dean and Professor**  
**Graduate School of Management**  
**University of California, Davis**

The primary mission of 21st century business schools should be to educate innovative, globally aware leaders who are prepared to make a positive impact on society. Our focus should be to teach students how to tackle business challenges with an integrated, multi-disciplinary approach anchored by teamwork, corporate citizenship and strong accountability. Yet, there is no simple formula in management education that best achieves this goal—as evidenced by the differentiation of varied formats, curricula and new ideas in today's business school market.

I believe that the public questioning of the efficacy of business schools by the media in the wake of the global financial crisis ultimately has had a positive effect on business education. It has presented us with a unique opportunity to reassert our value and relevance.

Even while some observers have attempted to distance business education from the managerial and corporate governance lapses and a pass-the-buck attitude toward financial risk that led to the collapse, deans and faculty have reflected on our outcomes, our roles and our guiding principles. For example, many have begun to question the extreme form of shareholder capitalism that led to the emphasis on short-term financial gains and the neglect of customers, employees, and communities with which businesses are inextricably linked.

Our reflections have involved a long, hard look at the skills, knowledge and values we offer business students, and how we deliver on our promises. The most immediate result: schools such as Harvard, Wharton, and the University of California, Berkeley have revamped their curricula, each differently and each drawing on their own competitive advantages and strengths.

Against this backdrop, AACSB International has continued to serve as a partner in innovative curriculum changes for continuous improvement of MBA programs, as has the Graduate Management Admission Council (GMAC) with its 10 million USD commitment to the Management Education for Tomorrow program to find the world's best ideas to advance graduate management education and fund them.

Beyond the benefits of accreditation and accountability to maintain high quality, AACSB should be embraced as a colleague with the critical resources, expertise and data we need to continuously improve our programs.

One only has to look at the recently completed AACSB study of the globalization of management education. The recommendations of the Globalization of Management Education Task Force summed it up succinctly: "Through AACSB, business schools can and should do more to accelerate the pace of globalization, improve the success of business schools in responding to globalization, and manage the benefits and costs of globalization. Working toward these goals is important because of the impact that globalization has more broadly on business and society. By augmenting accreditation standards and processes, rethinking accreditation strategy, expanding services to help business schools improve, and by redoubling efforts to collect and disseminate data and information, AACSB can make a substantial and positive difference for quality management education, business, and society."

Last spring here at the University of California, Davis Graduate School of Management—less than a year after I arrived as dean—we welcomed AACSB's team for our Maintenance of Accreditation Review. We brainstormed with the review team on innovative ways to enhance our MBA curriculum and better gauge its effectiveness with data-driven learning assessments. Our work with AACSB represents a partnership in success, a truly transformative process that has culminated in the most fundamental curriculum renewal in our school's history.

This autumn we will launch a new MBA curriculum that further integrates globalization, responsible business practices and sustainability while maintaining a solid grounding in essential business fundamentals. The changes to our core coursework, coupled with new advanced leadership and career-development programs, are the result of more than 10 months of work by a diverse task force of faculty, alumni, business leaders, and students. In January, the school's faculty overwhelmingly approved the revisions.

We are making dramatic changes that represent the merger of academic and practical approaches to build a new framework informed by the business world's needs. We also have developed specific assurance of learning measures and assessments to monitor effectiveness and signal the need for continuous innovations in the future.

Our new curriculum leverages the research and teaching strengths of our faculty; our campuses in Davis, the San Francisco Bay Area, and Sacramento; and the breadth of opportunities for our MBA students to work on compelling, hands-on projects for leading companies in the key sectors that intersect with UC Davis' world-leading research. At the same time, the curriculum remains highly integrated with our tight-knit community culture that is the hallmark of our MBA experience.

As many of you have in your own curricular innovations, we have derived precious lessons from the process. We found, for instance:

- The value of faculty leadership. In most of our universities, faculty members have a mandatory voice in curricular matters, if not outright decision rights. We embraced that and found that the most creative and robust curricular innovations emerged from a bottom-up process of faculty leadership.
- Collaboration between faculty and the dean's suite. As essential as faculty leadership is, their work can be made most productive and efficient by guidance from the dean's office regarding the process of deliberations. A well-crafted charge letter from the dean to a faculty committee or task force yields benefits with regard to both the quality of outcomes as well as appropriate uses of faculty time and school resources. The dean's office also can ensure that the process is evidence-based and not derailed by academic ideologies.

- Involvement by business leaders and alumni. In the classroom, students are consumers of the knowledge provided by our faculty members. But, the ultimate "customers" of any business school are the business leaders who employ our graduates. Therefore, business leaders deserve a compulsory voice in curricular deliberations. In addition to profoundly benefitting our students, curricular innovations also signal to the business community that we are responsive to their needs for new business graduates.

More and more, business schools are building a bold business future for our students by sharpening our focus on innovative, global leadership skill development. Let us redouble our efforts to design curricula that best prepares our graduates with the real-world practice and the analytical, technical, and leadership skills needed to succeed in the business world of today and tomorrow. Such enhancements reflect emerging trends and, demonstrate our collective entrepreneurial drive to stay ahead of the curve in business education.