

New AACSB Symposium Focused on MBA Curriculum Design

In late March, 200 business school professors and administrators from 15 countries gathered in Tampa, Florida for the inaugural *Redesigning the MBA: A Curriculum Development Symposium*. The symposium provided a forum to discuss important trends in MBA education, and to think strategically about the design of MBA courses and programs.

The symposium featured two facilitators, Srikant Datar, Arthur Lowes Dickinson Professor of Accounting, and David Garvin, C. Roland Christensen Professor of Business Administration, of Harvard Business School, whose three-year research project on the future of MBA education resulted in the book *Rethinking the MBA: Business Education at a Crossroads*. In addition, 12 professors from a range of schools introduced innovative courses in five "focused redesign" sessions: managing in a global context, leadership development, innovation and creativity, critical thinking and communication skills, and experiential learning. Each focused redesign topic addressed major criticisms leveled at MBA programs in recent years.

The opening session—*The Changing MBA Marketplace and Approaches to Curriculum Redesign*—outlined many of the significant challenges currently facing MBA programs, including the decrease in enrollment in many two-year, full-time MBA programs; the rise of alternatives to the two-year full-time MBA; declines in student engagement; and a rise in external and internal criticism of the degree's content. In response to these challenges, Datar and Garvin argued that business schools need to reassess the facts, frameworks, and theories that they teach, while also rebalancing their curricula to focus more on developing skills, capabilities, and techniques as well as cultivating values, attitudes, and beliefs.

The Symposium's focused redesign sessions featured exemplary courses and programs that effectively address many of the areas of need identified by deans, executives, and recruiters as critical for MBA programs to maintain their relevance.

Managing in a Global Context

The first focused redesign session showcased three approaches to helping students develop a global perspective by appreciating economic, institutional, and cultural differences across countries. Kendall Roth, J. Willis Cantey Chair of International Business and Economics, explained that fundamental shifts across the global economic and political landscape were important reasons for the recent revision of the IMBA curriculum at the University of South Carolina's Darla Moore School of Business. Among the many points Roth highlighted was the importance of understanding government-business interaction, especially in the context of emerging forms of commerce that depart from the Western model of capitalism.

Pankaj Ghemawat, the Anselmo Rubiralta Professor of Global Strategy at IESE Business School, introduced the Globalization of Business Enterprise (GLOBE) course, a three module course he has taught at IESE since 2009-10. As Ghemawat explained, the course opens with a module on levels of globalization across markets, which is often over estimated. The second module introduces the CAGE framework to distinguish the cultural, administrative, geographic, and economic dimensions of differences across countries, and the final module focuses on globalization and society, with an emphasis on issues such as the implications of market failures during the recent financial crisis.

The third presentation introduced an interdisciplinary course offered by the University of Southern California's Marshall School of Business entitled *The Global Context of Business*. Shantanu Dutta, vice dean for Graduate Programs and the Tappan Chair in Marketing, explained that this required course integrates frameworks, models, and concepts from multiple disciplines, and asks students to apply their newly acquired knowledge through projects based in destinations around the globe. For example, a recent project required students to create a marketing strategy for bringing a new coffee product to market in Thailand.

Leadership Development

The leadership development session featured three programs which effectively address the essential elements of leadership development—such as understanding the responsibilities of leadership, and developing effective approaches to influencing and guiding others. Donna Sockell, director of the Center for Education on Social Responsibility at the Leeds School of Business, University of Colorado at Boulder, outlined a stream of courses that deliver on the school's mission "to develop values-based, socially-conscious business leaders of tomorrow." Through these courses, students are taught the importance of two perspectives: inward understanding (values, ethical decision making, and knowing yourself), and outward facing (socially conscious, appreciating the impact of your actions on others, understanding stakeholders' perspectives, and the role of business). In her presentation, Sockell provided details of one course—*Leadership Challenges: Exercises in Moral Courage*—and demonstrated how the principles of the Center are delivered to students.

The second and third presentations in this session focused on experiential learning and coaching. Mindy Storrie, director of Leadership at the Kenan-Flagler Business School of The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, highlighted the ways in which both academic research and business practice are brought together in a model for shaping leaders. This model is encapsulated in a cycle of learning, which starts with principles, brings in practice, incorporates feedback, and builds in time for reflection. Storrie provided several examples of this model in practice, including a highly effective managerial simulation exercise.

Evelyn Williams, director of the Center for Leadership Development and Research at Stanford's Graduate School of Business, explained that the MBA curriculum they introduced in the fall of 2007 emphasizes leadership through "Leadership Labs," which develop both interpersonal skills and management skills. Williams further explained that learning is fostered through a reinforcing cycle of action, reflection, conceptualization, and application, which culminates in the "Executive Challenge" simulation in which alumni return to act as board members.

Innovation and Creativity

MBA programs are often criticized for failing to produce innovative and creative graduates. This session featured examples of courses designed to address these criticisms by encouraging students to engage in generative and lateral thinking and to experiment rapidly.

Vish Krishnan, Sheryl and Harvey White Endowed Chair and professor at the University of California, San Diego's Rady School of Management, introduced the school's year-long core course sequence, *Lab to Market*, which aims to help students create new products and ventures. Krishnan explained that *Lab to Market* offers an opportunity to learn and practice idea generation and validation techniques. Critical to this approach is the course's action learning philosophy, which helps students to identify opportunities and turn ideas into profitable products.

Fred Collopy, professor of Information Systems at Case Western Reserve University's Weatherhead School of Management, focused on the benefits of introducing a design and studio education approach to an MBA program. This approach relies on a different pedagogy from the traditional lecture- and case-based pedagogies used in most business school courses. Collopy provided numerous examples of ways in which a "design attitude" encourages students to learn by doing through rapid iteration. It also helps students to both identify problems and opportunities, as well as solve the right unstructured problem.

Critical Thinking and Communication Skills

Executives and recruiters repeatedly cite critical thinking, and its expression through proficient oral and written communication, as highly valued skills. This session presented two approaches to teaching these skills. J.D. Schramm, lecturer in management at Stanford's Graduate School of Business, provided an overview of the evolution of the *Critical Analytical Thinking (CAT)* course at Stanford and highlighted the ways in which the course develops communication skills.

While the CAT course concentrates on improving students' logical reasoning skills, the second program featured in this session—*Critical Thinking at Olin*—takes a different approach. Jackson Nickerson, the Frahm Family Professor of Organization and Strategy at Washington University's Olin Business School, explained that although logic is important in the Olin School's critical thinking courses, the emphasis is on training students to deal with biases that often lead to poorly or incorrectly formulated problems. As a result, critical thinking

courses at Olin focus on problem formulation tools and processes to overcome biases, as well as techniques to enhance metacognition so that students can improve their own thinking.

Experiential Learning

MBA students are often accused of suffering from a knowing-doing gap. Critics state that graduates from MBA programs are well-versed in frameworks and theories, but are less capable of applying them to the appropriate problem, and often have difficulty in identifying the root of an organization's problems. This session featured a number of experiential learning courses that aim to address this concern.

Gene Anderson, the D. Maynard Phelps Professor of Business Administration at the University of Michigan's Ross School of Business, introduced the school's *Multi-Disciplinary Action Projects (MAP)* course. MAP consists of intensive projects executed on site by MBA students in collaboration with a wide range of organizations across the globe, with the support of faculty advisors and coaches. The course is unique in that not only is it a required part of the core curriculum, but it is the only course offered during a seven-week period in March and April. Examples of projects include the development of strategic and marketing plans to grow revenue for a consumer goods company based in Italy and Russia, and a feasibility study of renewable energy solutions for a natural resources company in Mozambique.

Robert Kazanjian, Professor of Organization and Management at Emory University's Goizueta Business School, provided an overview of the development of experiential learning at Goizueta. He offered practical advice on how to start such programs and shared examples of how Emory's current experiential learning offerings—*Management Practice courses*—benefited from previous iterations. The current *Management Practice* courses include a new product lab, a project on financial valuation, and a project focused on helping organizations that are striving for meaningful social impact; such as a job placement agency for low-income, first-time job seekers in India.

Implementation Challenges

The symposium concluded with a session devoted to implementation challenges. Garvin presented a framework for thinking about curriculum redesign as a change process, which drew on the research of Michael Beer, Cahners-Rabb Professor of Business Administration Emeritus at the Harvard Business School and chairman of TruePoint. Garvin suggested that the success of a change process such as a curriculum redesign is a function of: the level of dissatisfaction with the status quo; the appeal of the vision for a desired future; and the process of change. All of this must be greater than the costs (felt losses) to those involved in the redesign. This framework was used as the basis for table discussions and ultimately resulted in a wide ranging discussion.