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Montana State University
College of Business
Bozeman, Montana, United States

www.montana.edu/cob

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Background

Since 1995 the Montana State University-Bozeman College of Business (COB) has used a cascading process to link curriculum content with specific learning goals as specified in general by the college mission. The initial process and the lessons learned are described below.

Description

The initial process was initiated by involving various stakeholder groups, including students, faculty, alumni, and business advisory board members in a comprehensive Strength-Weakness-Opportunity-Threat (SWOT) analyses. The exercise presented a clear picture of the internal capabilities and the external environment of the College. It indicated a uniquely suitable competitive niche in providing skill-based programs with a predominantly undergraduate focus. A new mission statement was appropriately fashioned.

The mission of the college of business at Montana State University–Bozeman is to prepare students for leadership roles in a diverse and global business world. Our students will:

- acquire knowledge of current business practices and theory and be conversant in the language of business.
- develop competencies in critical thinking and problem solving, rational and ethical decision-making, communication and leadership skills, and current technology.
- become lifelong, self-directed learners as demanded by the dynamic business environment of the future.

The College of Business is committed to serving the needs of its stakeholders who include students, faculty, staff, the University, employers, the citizens of Montana, families, the business community, and others providing support. The College supports faculty intellectual contributions emphasizing applied research and instructional development in furthering the College’s primary mission for undergraduate teaching. Service activities will have an outreach component in keeping with the University’s mission as a land grant institution.

The next step in the process was to “operationalize” the mission by defining key terms and ideas. These definitions would provide a tangible means to develop measures and collect data that could be used in the assessment cycle to support continuous curriculum improvement.
The COB curriculum committee developed learning goals with support from subject experts on the faculty. The mission statement was segmented into seven learning goals (listed below), each with operational definitions (see Learning Goals with Operational Definitions).

- Acquire Knowledge of Current Business Practices and Theory and Be Conversant in the Language of Business
- Competency in Rational and Ethical Decision Making
- Competency in Current Technology
- Leadership
- Become Lifelong, Self-Directed Learners
- Problem Solving and Critical Thinking
- Oral And Written Communication

Instructors were required to include mission-linked course objectives in syllabi for all courses in the core, option, and concentration (accounting, finance, management, and marketing) courses. (See example of learning objectives for the capstone strategy course.)

A matrix (see example) linked each of the 11 required business core courses to skill-related (written communication, oral communication, quantitative analysis, computer usage, critical thinking) and qualitative (creative thinking, international business, multicultural diversity, ethics, leadership) learning objectives. These competencies were developed by breaking down the mission into a set of comprehensive learning outcomes. All courses were expected to make a significant contribution to some, but not necessarily all, skill-related and qualitative learning objectives.

To complete the initial process, business core courses were reviewed by the core curriculum committee of the College to ensure that every business student, regardless of chosen option, was participating in the mission-driven curriculum.

**Lessons Learned**

This process of aligning the curriculum of the college with the college mission produced several positive results. First, faculty members gained a deeper appreciation for their contribution to achieving overall educational outcomes. By linking course objectives to the overall learning objectives as specified in the mission, it became clear that overall success depended on every instructor. Second, the process highlighted the importance of prerequisite relationships in the curriculum. Success in senior-level courses required students to master critical knowledge and skills in earlier coursework. Third, this strategic alignment process forced each instructor to define clear objectives for each course and include these
objectives in course syllabi. Finally, the process revealed weaknesses and gaps as faculty viewed the curriculum from a broad vantage point.

The COB continues to apply this process to review and update the mission and curriculum. Several additional changes in the mission and the curriculum have been made in recent years. For example, the process assisted faculty to respond appropriate to questions resulting from the emergence of the Internet in business and recent debates on the importance of ethical standards in light of national business scandals. In both cases the faculty decided to incorporate content into selected core and optional courses so that every student received the necessary instruction. The mission-driven curriculum planning approach has helped to keep the college curriculum relevant and effective.

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☐ Acquire Knowledge of Current Business Practices and Theory and Be Conversant in the Language of Business

Prior to formal admission in the College, students will have successfully completed courses requiring them to demonstrate basic skills in oral and written communication, mathematical and statistical concepts, economic theory, computer technology, accounting systems, and preparation of financial statements. This prerequisite course work serves as the foundation for upper-division business courses by focusing on the following: acquisition of a common body of knowledge and vocabulary of the discipline, as well as the development of professional competencies in communication, quantitative problem solving, and critical thinking.

COB students are expected to build on these competencies and basic knowledge as they progress through the junior-level business core courses. They must become knowledgeable in the following areas: theory and practices of organizational management, operations, and human resources; corporate finance; law; information systems and technology; and marketing. As they further progress and specialize, students must demonstrate their ability to integrate these competencies and knowledge in solving business problems. They must also be able to articulate, defend, and/or critically evaluate current business practices in ways that would allow them to effectively communicate to a variety of audiences, e.g. business professionals, clients or laypersons, and other parties.

☐ Competency in Rational and Ethical Decision Making

Rational and ethical decision making deals with issues of human conduct and the rules that should govern human action. It is characterized by respect for others, an awareness of justice, and sensitivity to the universal application of rules of conduct. Rational and ethical decision making explicitly focuses on two critical questions: “What is right or wrong?” and “What is good or bad?” A graduate of the COB will be competent in rational and ethical decision making when s/he is able to assess critically her/his actions and the actions of others with respect to these two questions.


☐ Competency in Current Technology

Competency in current technology encompasses the ability to use information technology when undertaking business decisions. The specific skills include: (1) navigating the Internet, (2) developing a document using a word processor, (3) collecting and analyzing data using a spreadsheet, and (4)
presenting ideas using a presentation graphics package. Competency should also include the ability to independently learn new software.

Reference: Computer Self-Efficacy and Perceived Computer Skills measurement forms at the University of Calgary, Canada.

http://www.acs.ucalgary.ca/~newsted/q5229.htm

Leadership

The essence of leadership is influence over followers (Yukl 1998). In the COB leadership is defined as the capacity of an individual to influence the attitudes or behavior of others toward the accomplishment of a goal. The COB strives to develop students’ influential abilities in such a way that they elicit enthusiasm and volunteerism from others. Leadership effectiveness is the extent to which the leader’s informal or formal group or organization performs its task successfully or attains its goals.


Become Lifelong, Self-Directed Learners

Following the work of Knowles (1990), the COB defines lifelong, self-directed learning as the process by which "individuals take a lifelong initiative, with or without the help of others, in diagnosing their own learning needs, formulating their own learning goals, identifying human and material resources for their own learning, choosing and implementing appropriate learning strategies and evaluating their own learning outcomes".


Problem Solving and Critical Thinking

Problem solving refers to the ability to comprehend, master, memorize and replicate knowledge, information, skills, facts, algorithms, techniques, approaches and methods.

Critical thinking is defined as the ability to structure and synthesize ambiguous information, to sort relevant from irrelevant information, to apply technical knowledge to new problem settings, to analyze and summarize information and to interpret the results of analysis. Brightman rightly defines problem solving and critical thinking via facets of the Bloom, Englehar, Furst, Hill, and Krathwohl taxonomy of cognitive objectives.
Problem solving can be defined as the beginning levels of the Bloom taxonomy: memory, knowledge and comprehension; critical thinking is defined in terms of the higher cognitive objectives: application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation.


**Oral And Written Communication**

Oral communication is defined as facility with standard presentation forms including impromptu, extemporaneous, informational and persuasive speaking, and demonstration of the cognitive abilities contained in Bloom’s taxonomy. Written communication is defined as facility with standard literary and business forms of writing. Such forms include APA Citation Format, legal brief, outline, memo, letter, financial plan, business plan, research proposal/report and legal contracts, as well as demonstration of the cognitive abilities contained in Bloom’s taxonomy. Graduates will demonstrate through speaking and writing their competence in memory, knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation.

To see year-by-year standards developed by Montana faculty for written and oral communication, follow this link.

Reference: See Brightman (above) for a review of Bloom’s Taxonomy

**Example of learning objectives for the capstone strategy course (2002-2003)**

- Students will master the terminology and models of competitive strategic analysis and how they apply to a variety of organizations and firms.
- Students will understand the meaning and significance of strategic concepts and develop a strategic perspective for observing and managing organizations.
- Students will acquire the ability to use the concepts learned in the core courses so as to develop a competitive firm perspective. This perspective includes understanding the development of a long-term sustainable organization that meets the needs of multiple stakeholders.
- Students will develop critical thinking skills, including: production of effective oral and written communication, assessment of organizational performance to identify significant problems and/or opportunities, and creation of relevant solutions to these problems/opportunities. These solutions should balance the economic, behavioral, and societal needs of stakeholders.
- Students will recognize organizational contexts where quantitative analysis may provide useful insights, will select and apply the appropriate technique, and will be able to formulate conclusions.
based upon analytical results. Students will also be able to understand and allow for the limitations of these techniques when forming conclusions.