

**A Modular Approach to Business Ethics Integration:
At the intersection of the *Stand-Alone* and the *Integrated* approaches**

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Running Head:

Modular Approach to Business Ethics Integration

Abbreviations:

AACSB Association to Advance Collegiate School of Business

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Abstract:

While no one seems to believe that business schools or their faculties bear entire responsibility for the ethical decision-making processes of their students, these same institutions do have some burden of accountability for educating students surrounding these skills. To that end, the standards promulgated by the Association to Advance Collegiate School of Business (AACSB), their global accrediting body, require that students learn ethics as part of a business degree. However, since the AACSB does not require the inclusion of a *specific* course to achieve this objective, it may be satisfied by establishing a stand-alone course in ethical decision-making, by integrating ethical decision-making into the existing curricula, by some combination of the two strategies, or through some alternative mechanism. Notwithstanding the choice of delivery process, though, the institution must ensure that it is able to demonstrate the students' achievement of learning with regard to ethics, a bar that was raised, or arguably simply modified, in 2003.

With learning objectives designed precisely to measure the student delta based on content, process and engagement in a particular class, those programs that have opted for stand-alone ethics courses may be (though not *necessarily* are) more prepared to respond to assessment-related inquiries regarding their programs or satisfaction of the standards. The relevance of the AACSB standards modification to the current efforts at ethics integration in business programs is instead a re-examination of how to create a program of integration that is designed to ensure the most effective learning results possible, while responding to the challenges presented by the integrated approach. The purpose of this discussion is to explore some of those challenges that may be somewhat universal to business school programs implementing the integrated approach, and to share one large university's response to those challenges, along with lessons learned.

**A Modular Approach to Business Ethics Integration:
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While no one seems to place on the shoulders of business schools and their faculties the entire responsibility for the ethical decision-making processes of the students who pass through their programs, these same institutions do bear some burden of accountability for educating students surrounding these skills and their corresponding issues (AACSB Ethics Education Task Force, 2004, p. 14). To that end, the standards promulgated by the Association to Advance Collegiate School of Business (AACSB), their global accrediting body, require that students learn ethics as part of a business degree. In particular, the AACSB's Ethics Education Task Force explains that, at all levels,

business schools must encourage students to develop a deep understanding of the myriad challenges surrounding corporate responsibility and corporate governance; provide them with tools for recognizing and responding to ethical issues, both personally and organizationally; and engage them at an individual level through analyses of both positive and negative examples of everyday conduct in business (AACSB Ethics Education Task Force, 2004, p. 9).

Moreover, business school deans rank ethics among the top five learning goals for their programs (Martell and Calderon, 2005). However, the AACSB does not generally require the inclusion of *specific* courses within an undergraduate or graduate business curriculum. Those involved in the development of academic programs may, accordingly, seek to achieve this above objective by establishing a stand-alone course in ethical decision-making, by integrating ethical

Running Head: Modular Approach to Business Ethics Integration

decision-making into the existing curricula and courses, by some combination of the two strategies, or through some alternative learning mechanism. Notwithstanding the choice of delivery process, though, the institution must ensure that it is able to demonstrate the students' achievement of learning with regard to ethics, a bar that was raised, or arguably simply modified, in 2003.

At that time, the AACSB revised its accreditation standards to include new language that updated the section on the "Assurance of Learning Standards." Milton Blood, the former Director of Accreditation for AACSB, explained that these new assurance of learning standards constituted *most significant change* in the revisions. "With the [new] standards, we require a demonstration of direct educational achievement. . . . Every degree program [must] have a set of defined learning goals and the school must show progress towards the assurance of learning for each of those learning goals" (Thompson, 2004). The evolution Blood describes is a shift from the previous *indirect outcome measurement* approach to *direct measurement* ("assurance of learning"). As a result, every AACSB-accredited institution is now expected to have assurance of learning programs in place for each of their degree programs that focus on direct measures of student achievement (Martell, 2007).

With learning objectives designed precisely to measure the student delta based on content, process and engagement in a particular class, those programs that have opted for stand-alone ethics courses may be (though not *necessarily* are) more prepared to respond to assessment-related inquiries regarding their programs or satisfaction of the standards. The relevance of the AACSB standards modification to the current efforts at ethics integration in business programs is

Running Head: Modular Approach to Business Ethics Integration

instead a re-examination of how to create a program of integration that is designed to ensure the most effective learning results possible, while responding to the challenges presented by the integrated approach. The purpose of this discussion is to explore some of those challenges that may be somewhat universal to business school programs implementing the integrated approach, and to share one large university's response to those challenges, along with lessons learned.

The Present, in Context

The program on which we shall report in detail emerged in the environment of one the largest, private, denominational universities in the United States. This designation is relevant only by virtue of the relative dearth of business ethics in portions of its program for a period of time when its presence might otherwise be expected. While, historically, business ethics had been a required course in the undergraduate business curriculum, there had been no congruent requirement in the graduate business curriculum, including both at the MBA level, as well as in other commerce masters programs.

The reasons for this absence are several and mirror those present throughout the academy. The university has a strong history of faculty governance; so, any changes needed to come from within rather than from above. Accordingly, it was not realistic for the dean or department chair(s) to *impose* a stand-alone course, nor to *require* faculty to infuse ethics throughout their related courses. To move forward in this manner would only have created a much stronger resistance and, ultimately, failure in achieving the objective.

Running Head: Modular Approach to Business Ethics Integration

Second, the MBA program at this particular institution was designed around a mission of access for students who sought an efficient means by which to acquire a high quality degree in a brief period of time; so, an additional course was not an option. In addition, given this context, the curriculum was already quite trim and it was not possible to remove a current offering in order to create space for an additional required course. While ethics was already offered as an elective under several titles (such as traditional business ethics and “ethics and leadership”), the present intent was to mandate ethical decision-making for every MBA student who graduated from this institution.

Finally, if we were to create a process of ethics integration, that process would need to consider the myriad levels of faculty expertise and comfort with the subject (not always correlative), as well as – literally – the *varying faculty* who might teach it, since the courses into which ethics might be integrated would be staffed by new faculty as time proceeded.

In order to survive what, in law, would be considered a “motion to dismiss,” we needed to gain the support of the Department of Management, into whose courses the ethics would necessarily be integrated. If the department would approve the integration, we could proceed with the development of the materials so that we could, at least, have the opportunity to demonstrate that the integration is possible and assurances of learning can be met. Faculty governance became the first hurdle, and there were two strategies that we used in order to overcome this threshold challenge.

Running Head: Modular Approach to Business Ethics Integration

First, we worked from within in order to garner internal buttressing for the integration process. At the time of the proposal, it was not its subject matter experts but instead the department's curriculum committee from whom the final recommendation originated, with abutment from the dean's office. Second, in consultation with the Curriculum Committee, practitioners were asked to join the meeting for a time in order to share with the department their perception of the vital and urgent need for preparation in the application of ethical decision-making to management and leadership roles in business. It was the dual tenacity of these efforts that led the department as a whole to affirm the need for the integration of ethics in the curriculum. In the end, it was a sense of responsibility, abetted by, "if not us, then who?" that carried the support.

The Modular Approach to Integration

In order to respond to the objection to a stand-alone course, while recognizing some of the real benefits that would accrue from a commitment at that system level (Hartman and Hartman, 2005), the department instead opted to mandate the structural inclusion of ethics throughout its four required MBA courses. The courses are taught once per week on a calendar of ten-week quarters (with exams in the eleventh week). To reach a relative equivalent of a course, the department required nine modules across the four courses (comprised of three modules in the principles course, two in operations, two in human resource management and two in strategy).

The faculty who were subject matter experts in business ethics were engaged to create the nine modules in deep dialogue and consultation with the faculty who would be teaching the identified courses. The modules would be designed with the following four principles in mind.

Running Head: Modular Approach to Business Ethics Integration

- They would be seamlessly integrated with the subject matter of each course;
- Each module would be able to be taught over the course of a single evening *or* could be separated into its component parts so that the various faculty could use consistent materials but in a manner appropriate to their personal teaching style;
- They would be as user-friendly as humanly possible; and
- The modular system would be flexible. In other words, as long as the instructor achieves the learning objectives of each module, he or she could customize the modules with materials that fit with their teaching style and other course objectives.

While each of these elements was vital to the effectiveness of the implementation plan, it was this final component that was critical to the success of the integration project from an interpersonal perspective. In connection with the third challenge identified above, the significant distinctions in expertise and comfort with the subject among participating faculty (all faculty who taught the identified courses), and because this particular institution is wholly committed to the concept of shared governance, it would have been acutely calamitous to the process if faculty felt forced to include materials of which they did not approve, understand or believe to be in line with their course objectives. To the contrary, the module materials in this case were developed only after lengthy development meetings and other interactions.

The culminating result of this effort is a set of learning goals for each module. Of course, if an experienced professor already integrates ethics effectively in her or his course and can offer a compelling argument for the assurance of student learning in that arena, that individual may

Running Head: Modular Approach to Business Ethics Integration

choose not to use the modules at all. However, the materials do include elements oriented toward the instructor who perhaps has never before explored ethical issues in a course as well as toward the seasoned faculty member who has done so since the origins of her or his career; accordingly, it was indispensable to provide many choices for the user throughout the modules. We also needed to ensure that the modules included both those materials that might necessarily be included in any instructor's choice of lesson plan, as well as a hefty set of materials that could provide alternative options for those professors who may desire to include additional exploration of ethics in the course. Critical to the AACSB's 2003 modifications, included in the materials are also proposed methods of assessment in order to assist the instructor in demonstrating the students' achievement of learning in ethics.

The Modules

As mentioned above, each module is created with the intent that it be taught *either* in a single three-hour class session or as component elements sprinkled across several sessions, depending on the instructor's teaching style, preference and appropriateness to the course content. The modules are comprised of the following materials:

1. Learning Objectives

For example, the first module, integrated in the Principles of Management course, established the following learning objectives:

Running Head: Modular Approach to Business Ethics Integration

At the end of the module, students shall be able to:

- Articulate the urgency of ethics for business decision-making;
- Explore the nature of ethics and ethical decision-making.
- Recognize challenges inherent in some current decision-making models.
- Develop their own ethical reasoning decision model.
- Apply analytical reasoning skills to management challenges using judgments informed by stakeholder management theory.
- Adopt and utilize a “vocabulary” of ethics.

2. Agenda

- Format based on time layout (three hour block)
- Format based on materials involved (for personalization purposes)

3. *Annotated* Powerpoint slides

- Lecture notes (including literal scripts, where necessary)
- Process notes (for slides that involve discussions, activities, or others that require process elements)
- Exercise notes (explanations for instructor of how to run each exercise suggested throughout the module)
- Notes to accompany audio-visual recommendations (including scripts for process, where necessary)

Running Head: Modular Approach to Business Ethics Integration

- Tailored case notes for discussion (cases are recommended in each module and teaching notes have been modified for instructors who might not be familiar with the underlying ethics concepts)

4. Additional Supporting Materials

- Assignments (recommendations for pre-module assignments are included)
- Faculty background readings
- Recommended student readings (cases, chapters, articles, and other materials)
- Assessments (strive to assess all three learning capacities - cognitive, skills, affect)
- Audio-visual recommendations

The following is an example of general subject matter coverage in connection with the first three modules, which are embedded in the Principles of Management course in the MBA program (see figure 1):

Insert Figure 1 about here

Support Mechanisms, Self-Assessment, Follow-Up

Unfortunately, as we have learned in our own professional experiences, if we do not measure something, it often declines in importance. Such is the same result with regard to ethics. We need to consider – and ask our administrations to examine - what is the message we are sending to students (and to our colleagues) if we are not effective in our own assessment processes? If

Running Head: Modular Approach to Business Ethics Integration

ethics instruction is not measured, assessed or monitored, it is difficult to encourage faculty and students throughout an organization to pay attention to it. Further, what is the value of this internal assessment process if we do not put it to use in a proactive manner, in order to have an impact on the operations, process and content of our programs and our program goals?

Accordingly, we are all asked to “close the loop” – to use assessment data to improve the curriculum (Martell, 2007). To systematize this process within the modular structure, faculty in this program are asked to self-assess in annual reports, based on the achievement of the articulated learning objectives. They are asked not only what their students learned, but also what they learned and what they plan to do with that learning. To facilitate this exploration and self-evaluation, and also to encourage collaboration on the ongoing modification and anticipated improvement of the materials (since they represent an organic and developmental series), a listserv was created and participation by all faculty involved in teaching these courses is actively encouraged. The “loop” therefore begins to take shape (See figure 2):

Insert Figure 2 about here

Conclusion

The modular approach we have outlined in this paper is aligned with AACSB Executive Vice-President and Chief Accreditation Officer, Jerry Trapnell’s definition of an effective assessment program, which includes:

- Mission-driven

Running Head: Modular Approach to Business Ethics Integration

- Faculty-owned
- Addresses key learning goals
- Teaches to the learning goals
- Direct assessment of learning is expected, indirect assessments may also be taken
(has multiple measures)
- Has adequate support
- Leads to documented improvements in student learning (Trapnell, 2007)

It is beyond question at this point that ethical decision-making is one of the necessary skills with which students must be armed upon graduation from an undergraduate or graduate business program in order to be most effectively prepared to meet the challenges that await her or him in today's professional environment. To the contrary, however, the question of the best process or processes by which to prepare our students is not ineluctably agreed upon. The modular approach described in this discussion is surely just one option of many successful alternatives. Nevertheless, it does seem to satisfy some of the compelling objections to other proposals that have been previously offered.

[Figures follow References, below]

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Running Head: Modular Approach to Business Ethics Integration

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[Figures begin on next page]

Figure 1: Module Subject Matter Coverage



Figure 2: Closing the Loop

