

A Note on Capstone Courses in the Agricultural Economics Curriculum:

The example of AIM 4011.

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One of the perennial debates in the study of undergraduate educations is the positioning and use of “capstone” courses to integrate and focus knowledge and skills as students matriculate in their academic programs. “Capstone” courses may take several forms. One such form is internationalization of curricula in which the teaching of language, culture and business practices are integrated into a single or multiple courses, the intent being similar to a cultural immersion experience within courses(St.Martin,1995). The Department of Applied Economics at the University of Minnesota has featured over eleven courses which involve international aspects(Applied Economics Department Self-Study 1998/99). These courses are currently being used to satisfy a university-wide international theme. Study Abroad is a current program at the University of Minnesota in which students receive academic credit for study at foreign universities, which combined with other cultural immersion activities suffices to complete the required experience.

Another aspect of capstone courses is the use of internships external to the collegiate program. The concept of an internship is that of a business-academic partnership in which classroom concepts are reinforced in the outside business community. Internships are well-accepted as a form of capstone experience in the health sciences, accounting, engineering, teaching and many other field of inquiry. These experiences could well be considered to be externships due to the degree of control

exercised by the participating business. Internships may be continuous throughout a program or in specific segments of an academic program-usually toward the middle or the end. Vocational programs can offer up to one half time opportunities in these areas.

Many shorter experiences will suffice as an application also. A directed case study or field experience is used as a shorter segment focusing on certain material. Colleges of Business, management and marketing classes have used this technique at the University of Minnesota. The author uses this technique extensively in a newly developed course in Retail Management.

The use of practicums or other versions of senior level experiences is a way to complete the required experience within the respective colleges(Siegfried,1991). Many colleges require a senior project to graduate(Reinke,1991)(Dixon,1997). The honors programs at the University of Minnesota and other colleges requires such an effort for graduating students(College of Agriculture, Food and Environmental Service honors program).

Project Sunrise and Curriculum Reform

The specific focus of this paper is to examine the origins and current status of a practicum course which arose out of a curriculum change efforts in the mid-1980's. Project Sunrise was a grant supported effort to rejuvenate the curriculum at the College of Agriculture at the University of Minnesota. Ms. Bonnie Pecktel was hired under the grant to develop collegewide effort(Sunrise grant). Other key participants were Dr. Dale

Dahl(Ag.Economics), Dr. David Smith(Food Science); as well as other key faculty. The efforts resulted in combining of several undergraduate majors in a business-focused major called Ag. Industries and Marketing. The terminal courses for this major was a practicum called AIM 5001 and 5002. These two credit experiences were designed around the completion of a marketing plan for an agribusiness product. Dr. Dahl was a key participant in this course origination because of his and later the authors involvement with the National AgriMarketing Association student marketing plan project(an extra curricular activity participated in by most other land grand programs). It was this involvement which correctly placed this experience in the curriculum to which it exists(in semester version)today.

Other departments followed this lead in exploring capstone courses. Dr. Steve Simmon of the Agronomy and Plant Sciences department authoried a grant to promote the use of decision cases as capstone courses in the Agronomy department. The grant and subsequent development of cases has been a success which has involved several other departments. The grant will be expiring this year on these efforts. The department of agronomy has required this capstone course of all of its graduating seniors. So what of the future?

Efforts are underway to develop capstone courses in the agricultural economics department in a similar fashion to that of the agronomy department. AgEc 4821 will be used to teach financial and operations management through the use of case studies developed by Dr. Kent Olson and Dr. Vernon Eidman. The food science department has

developed a nutrition component in the form of a practicum which prepares students for the dietetics licensing exam. Other prelicensing applications could lend themselves to real estate, commodity(series3), stock brokerage(series 7) and other areas. The author current coordinates proprietary courses in appraisal and farm management which are used for certification. These may be further extensions of the use of practicums.

An Evaluation of Current Efforts

This survey of capstone activities at the University of Minnesota shows the wide range of activities that constitute a final matriculation experience. These efforts are not exhaustive to this date as several of these activities are not widely shared among departments. The consensus seems to be that courses of this type fulfill a definite role in their respective departments and serve as integrating experiences. The author plans a survey of these efforts both within the University of Minnesota and among other departments of a similar nature. The author has, however, reviewed the marketing practicum course both in terms of student acceptance and also in terms of its curricular fulfillment. The results of student surveys show that students recognize the importance of relating marketing concepts to an actual marketing plan. One student commented that the course” helps to solidify the concepts(ideas) learned in other courses”.

In terms of its curricular emphasis on preparation of students for careers in marketing, the extension of this marketing plan to student competition in the National AgriMarketing Student Marketing Competition is an important part of this course. The

student's efforts are evaluated by industry judges at the highest collegiate level. Student comment that the participation in the Student Marketing Competition was truly memorable.

References

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