

The Accounting Education Change Commission Grant Experience: A Summary

Chapter 10 UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AT AMHERST Three Curriculum Change Projects

Type, Size and Mission of Accounting Program

The Department of Accounting & Information Systems is one of four academic departments in the School of Management at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. As the accounting program at the Commonwealth of Massachusetts' flag-ship University, our mission is to advance its goals and those of the School of Management. As part of a land grant and research institution, we are committed to providing higher education and public service. We do so by offering high quality educational programs that prepare qualified students for careers in accounting, related management professions, and academe; by creating and sharing new knowledge through faculty and doctoral research; and by providing outreach services to the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. Our aim is to be recognized on campus, within the larger University system, and throughout the state for leadership in the field of accounting. We strive to be the premier accounting program at a public university in New England and to be recognized for excellence among programs, public and private, in the Northeast.

The department's undergraduate program in accounting has approximately 120 graduates each year. About one-third of those graduates accept positions in public accounting, primarily with Big-Six firms. The School of Management has about 40 graduates each year from its on-campus masters program (Master of Business Administration and Master of Science in Accounting); usually six to eight of these students are in the Master of Science program. On average, two students are admitted each year to the doctoral program in accounting.

Our AECC grant concentrated primarily on the undergraduate level. Accordingly, the focus in the remaining sections of this report is directed to our undergraduate program in accounting.

Characteristics of Program Before the Grant

Historically, the department has had a traditional undergraduate program in accounting and its graduates have been well received in the marketplace. Nonetheless, we recognized before applying for the AECC grant that the skills demanded of accounting graduates were changing and that our curriculum had to change, too. Like many programs at the time, we believed that our curriculum was reasonably well designed to provide technical accounting skills to our students. However, we realized that inadequate attention was given to the development of expertise in the following areas: oral and written communication, critical thinking and problem solving, working in groups and making decisions in a group environment, and integration of the computer into the learning and decision-making process. In addition, we noted at the time that public accounting firms were beginning to hire an increasing number of students majoring in the liberal arts or the sciences.

Major Changes from Pre-Grant Condition

Our AECC grant concentrated on making curriculum changes in three different areas of our undergraduate accounting program. These changes are discussed in turn.

Accounting Course for Liberal Arts or Science Majors

This accounting course was developed during 1991. It has been offered at least once per year since January 1992. The course is available to students from the four liberal arts colleges in the immediate area, plus non-business students at the University of Massachusetts. A primary goal is to allow

non-business students to consider careers in accounting.

The core activity is a three-credit financial accounting class taught in much the same way as an MBA-level first course in accounting (emphasis on interpretation of financial statements, with a lesser emphasis on construction of those statements). Other activities that have been used to supplement the course include workshops on additional accounting topics, a management game, and a field trip. To date, the most successful field trip has been to a stockholders' meeting of a medium-size company in Boston.

It should be noted that the main objective of this course is to attract nontraditional students (principally arts and science majors) into the accounting profession. In order to do this, these students must receive academic training in accounting and related areas. We expect this to be done at the graduate level. Accordingly, we have counseled each interested student to first complete his or her program of study in the arts or sciences and then apply to a graduate program in business or accounting. To a graduate program in business or accounting. To date, a number of graduates of this accounting course have entered MBA or Master of Accounting programs.

Communications Course for Accounting Majors

This course, which focuses on both written and oral communication skills, was developed during 1990. A business communications consultant was employed to head up the project team.

The course was offered for the first time in the Fall 1991 semester. It continues to this day as a required course for all accounting majors. During the first two years, students met twice per week in large lecture sections and once during the week in small discussion sections. For the past three years, students have met three times per week in smaller sections (no more than 35 students). Despite changes in the way the course is delivered, the overall objectives have remained the same. A description of the current version of the course and its objectives is presented below.

The stated purpose of the course is to enable one to acquire and practice writing, thinking and speaking skills vital for effective performance in a variety of business environments. Writing assignments are used as a way to have the student think critically about audience, purpose and content, explore career development choices, become acquainted with business populations, and gain perspective on cultural differences in international business communications. A process approach to business writing is used in which the student is expected to (a) analyze writing constraint and decide on goals and purposes; (b) gather data, generate ideas, and organize content; (c) draft, rewrite, revise, edit, and proofread material, and (d) give and receive edits and responses to and from peers.

During the course, students are expected to write letters, memos and reports; give oral presentations; and interact in group projects. These assignments require the student to (a) construct arguments and gather evidence to support claims, (b) document their sources, (c) communicate and collaborate with others, (d) plan visual lay outs for accessibility, and (e) think critically about tactics, tone, image, credibility, and international communications problems.

One full-time faculty member is in charge of the course. She is assisted by a number of teaching assistants (usually doctoral students from the English Department).

Computer-Based Modules for Use in the Introductory Course in Accounting

To date we have developed the following computer-based modules that are currently used to enhance the introductory course in accounting:

A software case that demonstrates the effects of individual business transactions on the primary financial statements. Effects of transactions are shown graphically. The user may cover transactions in any order desired; a toggle function allows for repeated viewing of the balance sheet before and after each transaction. This case might be used by an instructor in class or by a student outside of class. The software case was constructed using Toolbook.

Two financial analysis in cases. Each case involves computer-based searches for relevant company and industry data in Moody's Company Data — Academic Edition database. Results of the searches may then be downloaded into a Lotus file for further analysis. The cases are meant to be assigned for students to complete outside of the classroom.

Methods of Achieving Faculty and Administrative Support for Changes

From the beginning, the Dean of the School of Management and faculty members within the department have been supportive of the AECC project. As might be expected, though, some faculty were more strongly committed than others.

Faculty support was enhanced by providing monetary stipends to project team leaders and explicitly recognizing the efforts and accomplishments of project team members in the annual faculty evaluation process.

Another method of achieving faculty support was to engage two specialists (a business communications consultant and a person proficient with multimedia authoring software) in areas where faculty expertise was lacking. This minimized certain "start-up costs" that would otherwise have been made by department faculty members.

The Dean of the School of Management was particularly helpful by keeping the importance of the AECC project visible to the entire School of Management. In a similar vein, a campus visit by the Executive Director of the AECC, did much to demonstrate the importance of the project to the University as a whole. His individual meetings with project team members, the Dean of the School of Management, and the University Provost and administrative staff were extremely important to us.

Change Activities That Worked Well and Which Others Might Copy

We have identified six curriculum and pedagogical innovations that worked well for us. Any or all of them might be employed by those at other universities. They are:

1. Integrating competencies other than technical accounting skills into the accounting curriculum. These skill-based competencies include written communication, oral communication, working in groups, and critical thinking. While these competencies were first introduced in one or more of our AECC projects, they are found now in many courses in our curriculum (managerial accounting, intermediate accounting, systems, international accounting, and auditing). The establishment of the required communications course was the major catalyst in this regard.
2. Using a team approach to curriculum planning and teaching. As noted above, a team approach was used to accomplish each of our AECC grant objectives. This approach is now being used in other areas of the curriculum. Teams are currently being used to better integrate "clusters of courses." For example, we are currently using a team approach to better integrate material in the following four courses: introduction to computers, business applications of computers, systems, and auditing.
3. Integrating computer-based teaching modules into the curriculum. These modules were developed as an AECC project for the introductory accounting course required of all School of Management students. New computer-based modules are currently being developed for several other courses in the accounting curriculum.
4. Establishment of a Writing Center. There have been many benefits that have resulted from the development of the required communications course. One of these positive developments has been the establishment of a Writing Center. The Center is staffed by graduate teaching assistants and is available to all School of Management students.
5. Videotaping of students' oral presentations. A key ingredient in any learning experience is timely and effective feedback. We have become much more efficient in providing videotape feedback to students after they make oral presentations in our classes. This is done by using portable mounted cameras that are readily available in most classrooms.
6. Field trips to stockholders' meetings. One of the components to the accounting course we

developed for liberal arts and science majors was a field trip to attend an annual stockholders' meeting. Student feedback was extremely positive. The experience provided external validation to many students that what they had learned in a classroom was relevant in the business world.

Change Activities Undertaken That Did Not Work

One of the initiatives proposed in our original grant application to the AECC was the establishment of a network computer classroom that might be used by instructors in any of our courses. For technical and budgetary reasons, we were not able to make the networked lab a reality. The initiative was subsequently scaled down to the development of computer-based teaching modules to be used in the introductory accounting course. Computer-based modules are currently being developed for several others courses in the accounting curriculum.

The idea of a networked computer lab with a common database that might be used by a number of different accounting courses is still a viable goal. Recent upgrades to our computer facilities and the experience of faculty in making curriculum changes make this a likely possibility in the future.

Measurement of the Effects Changes Accomplished

Effects of curriculum changes have been assessed by means of exit interviews of students, course and the teacher evaluations by students, discussions with the department's Advisory Council, and discussions with faculty teaching the relevant courses. And, in the case of the accounting course for arts and science majors, we have also tracked graduates of this course to see how many eventually enroll in MBA or Master of Science programs.

Each of the projects was "fine-tuned" as we gained more actual experience with the specific curriculum changes. The scope and nature of written assignments in the communications course, for example, have changed over the years as we have learned more about students' skills and expectations.

Special Insights from Carrying Out Our AECC Grant

We have learned through participation in this exceptional program how difficult and yet stimulating change can be. While the outcomes of all of our efforts were not always exactly as planned, the grant has been a remarkable catalyst for significant and needed change. We wish to express our deep appreciation to the Accounting Education Change Commission.

Plans to Perpetuate the Changes That Worked Well

All of the changes we have implemented as part of the original AECC grant, in our view, have been successful. We are committed to retaining these innovations but within the context of continual improvement. Moreover, we are in the process of extending these innovations to other areas of our curriculum.

Major Reports and Articles Generated from Grant Activities

We filed four progress reports and one major summary report of our activities with the Accounting Education Change Commission. These are available to anyone who requests them.

Materials Available to Send to Others and How to Get Them

In addition to copies of the reports mentioned above that have been filed with the AECC, we would be pleased to send any of the following additional information to those who request it:

Syllabi for courses developed as part of the grant.

Course materials (assignments, cases, etc.) from any of these courses.

Please send inquiries to:

Dept. of Accounting & Information Systems
School of Management
University of Massachusetts
Amherst, MA 01003