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Strategies for Evaluating Undergraduate Degree Programs

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Evaluating higher education degree programs is an arduous task. This paper suggests innovative strategies for addressing four types of challenges that commonly occur during program evaluation: identifying theoretical models for evaluation, balancing potentially conflicting standards, accommodating faculty differences, and aligning courses. Examples from an undergraduate social work program evaluation are presented to illustrate the strategies.

Introduction

Higher education degree programs must regularly evaluate and update their curriculum. Knowledge development in the program's discipline, accreditation reviews, changing student learning needs, and evolving workplace expectations regarding employee educational achievements compel educators to assess curriculum content and outcomes. However, a number of significant challenges can make this a daunting task. This paper explores creative strategies for addressing four types of challenges that commonly occur during undergraduate degree program evaluations: 1) identifying and applying theoretical models to guide curriculum evaluation; 2) balancing potentially conflicting standards from educational institutions, provincial education ministries, professional accreditation bodies, and the marketplace; 3) accommodating faculty differences regarding course design, program goals, and concerns about academic freedom; and 4) effectively aligning courses with each other and with the overall program goals. Examples from an undergraduate social work program evaluation illustrate methods for implementing and refining these strategies.

Models for Curriculum Evaluation and Teaching

Degree program evaluations ultimately assess the achievement of learning goals. Instruction content, methods, and assessment should effectively accomplish goals based on the needs of the student,

community, and field of knowledge (Diamond, 2008). A more traditional model for identifying learning goals uses a developmental approach that surveys or convenes focus groups with students, graduates, employers, community stakeholders, and scholars in order to receive feedback about current program learning and desired learning outcomes. Field related literature may also propose educational needs.

A second, andragogical model expands this approach by considering teaching and learning concepts that describe effective course design and teaching methods for adults (Thoms, 2001). Effective adult learning occurs when teacher and student collaborate to create learning. Adults learn by integrating knowledge with their past experiences and applying it to skills building. Increased classroom interaction, experiential learning, and use of workplace examples support educational goals that are relevant to students' future careers and challenge students to actively manage their current and life-long learning (Council for Adult and Experiential Learning, 2000). Proponents of authentic assessment advocate instruction and student evaluation that "reflects or simulates a real-life situation that could confront students in their internship or future professional life" (Gulikers, Bastiaens, & Kirschner, 2004, p. 69). Authenticity, or the alignment between education and workplace, prepares students for employment demands.

Learning is also enhanced when it defines measurable knowledge, attitudes, and skills following successful education experiences (Shipley, 1995). These learning outcomes portray student performance rather than the content of instruction, and they therefore provide indicators for assessing levels of student achievement, forming the basis for course assignments and grading. Action verbs associated with Bloom's Taxonomy of Education indicate the level of learning: knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, or evaluation (Aviles, 2001). For example, "describe physical, cognitive, emotional, and social aspects of human development" indicates one level of learning. Analyzing or applying those elements indicates further levels of learning. Once outcomes are determined, course content and instructional methods are chosen because they best accomplish the learning outcomes (Shipley, 1994).

Program evaluation in the author's undergraduate social work program initially used a developmental model in which focus groups with students, faculty, and representatives from local human service organizations suggested learning needs and outcomes. However, the need to organize ideas according to specific learning outcomes and teaching methods compelled combining developmental and andragogical models. The evaluation team adopted an incremental approach that initially focused on defining learning outcomes. Training sessions about learning outcomes were arranged in order to provide faculty with a common language for describing the desirable knowledge, attitudes, and skills that students should demonstrate following each course and at graduation. Then evaluation team members promoted learning outcomes by explaining benefits, sharing examples, and providing consultation for composing outcome statements for individual courses. This facilitated the creation of specific learning outcomes for the program and for each course. Composing a learning outcome for a course about working with families depicts this process. Input from community social workers and students demonstrated the need for coursework that helped students appreciate the impact of diverse family structures. The course professor proposed "describe diverse family structures and dynamics" as a course learning outcome. The evaluation team suggested the revision "analyze the impact of family structure and dynamics," in order to better define the needed level of learning. This process successfully defined learning outcomes for each course. A similar method will be used to link instructional methods, assessment tools, and learning outcomes in the future.

Balancing Potentially Conflicting Standards

Another challenge for higher education course evaluators is assuring compliance with degree completion requirements and discipline-specific

standards from educational institutions, provincial educational ministries, professional accreditation bodies, and professional licensing or registration regulators. Course content and outcomes also reflect student learning needs and skills needed for successful job acquisition. Logic models offer a creative method for collecting and organizing these standards. Logic models depict and integrate key program inputs, actions, and outcomes (Cooksy, Gill, & Kelly, 2001). These models organize diverse influences by identifying discrete elements within each input, action, or outcome and combining them into a summary description. In the case of educational standards, itemizing distinct aspects and matching each source according to those aspects can produce a convergence that more clearly displays how curriculum content and outcomes correspond to standards.

The author's evaluation team collected standards from their University, the Ontario Ministry of Education, and the Canadian Association of Social Work Education. The team then created a table with a column for each standard-setting source (e.g., university, educational ministry, professional body) and rows that matched standard components across sources. A column was added in order to compare social work program learning outcomes with each component. For example, a table row containing expectations related to critical thinking included "developed critical thinking and analytical skills" from the Ontario Qualifications Framework bachelor's degree standards (Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities, 2009), "critical thinking and problem-solving skills" from the characteristics of a University of Windsor graduate (University of Windsor Program Development Committee, 2010), "critical analysis of Canadian social work" from the Canadian Association of Social Work Education (2008), and "use critical thinking...to integrate knowledge, values, and skills" from the social work program learning outcomes. This process streamlined the evaluation and effectively explained how social work courses met requirements from multiple sources. It will also provide clear documentation that will support future program evaluations, reviews, and accreditations.

Accommodating Faculty Differences

Educational design and evaluation inherently raises issues of academic freedom and differing ideas of education among faculty members. A helpful strategy for resolving member differences is a positive motivational model that considers the impact of individual needs, goals, and motivation on group action (Harris & Hartman, 2002). Although program evaluation may meet common needs of faculty by establishing professional competence and improving ability to attract students, individual faculty members are influenced by personal and professional goals, current work projects, areas of interest, and skills related to program evaluation or curriculum development. Organizational leaders can promote positive group action by identifying individuals with needed skills and interests, discussing costs and benefits of change, analyzing various individual priorities, and reviewing possible projected outcomes. Seeking input from all faculty members, acknowledging academic autonomy, and presenting proposals that include rationales for changes, encourage consensus that supports group approval and expedites implementation of curriculum changes.

The author's evaluation team used this strategy by presenting the benefits of evaluating course learning outcomes, including improved clarity for students and various program reviewers, reduced duplication of learning tasks in multiple courses, increased clarity of the essential purpose and learning for each course, and increased consistency and course alignment. They asked professors to compose learning outcomes for their courses and provided consultation and standardized forms to assist this process. Ongoing feedback from faculty members showed the importance of presenting consultation and forms as tools to help professors rather than instructions for them. The evaluators maintained the professor's content and words when advising modifications. They explained suggested revisions and asked the submitting professor for rebuttal prior to presenting all proposed changes for approval.

Faculty members indicated that this process valued their ideas about course design, and evaluation team suggestions were perceived as helpful. Consequently, course changes were approved by the faculty without significant debate.

Course Alignment

Evaluating individual courses overlooks the alignment or connections between courses within a program. Educational experiences are incremental and integrative, in which learning advances from basic to complex and by combining knowledge, attitudes, and skills from a variety of courses or sources within and outside the program. Vertical alignment is the incremental changes in learning over grades or time, and horizontal alignment is the complimentary learning across subjects or courses presented concurrently (Martineau, Paek, Keene, & Hirsch, 2007). A set of courses in an educational program should demonstrate how course content and outcomes build on the learning outcomes from previous courses and how courses from different disciplines or learning tracks complement each other to accomplish integrative learning defined by program outcomes. Additionally, program and course outcomes are synergistically related: program outcomes guide course outcomes which in turn combine to define the program outcomes. Effective course alignment assures that all program outcomes are accomplished by courses without unnecessary duplication.

Previous social work program evaluations had not systematically assessed alignment, so a new procedure was developed. Evaluators mapped program and course learning outcomes according to educational tracks/sequences: social policy, human behaviour theories, research, and social work practice including field placements. Outcomes were further categorized according to Bloom's Taxonomy (Aviles, 2001) to reflect the learning domain (e.g., knowledge, attitude, or skills), and the level of learning (e.g., identifying, analyzing, applying, or evaluating). Individual course outcomes were revised to clearly demonstrate increasing complexity over time. For example, many courses expected students would apply social work values when working with vulnerable populations. The team suggested "identify social work values" for a beginning level course outcome, and "describe how social work values influence work with vulnerable populations" for a course focusing on vulnerable populations. Subsequent courses would specify values related to the course focus, such as "respecting family cultural norms" in a family social work course.

Connections between courses from different sequences were also highlighted, such as "applying research methods in practice" in both practice and research courses. In addition, reviewing course and program learning outcomes discovered that the program outcome "use critical thinking to compare multiple methods of intervention" was not clearly included in course outcomes. Practice course outcomes tended to focus on describing or applying methods of intervention. Adding "critically compare" to the course outcomes more clearly demonstrated how students accomplished the program outcome.

Overall Evaluation Strategies

There are three innovative features that underlie the strategies and models previously discussed. First, developmental and logic models are more effective for mapping needed changes than amalgamating proposals from multiple stakeholders or justifying decisions of a specific individual or faction. These models endorse a problem-solving approach that is interactive, incremental, and inclusive, since more accurate descriptions of diverse elements and perspectives strengthen a logic model and suggest ongoing development rather than a prescribed status quo.

Second, course evaluation that focuses on content does not adequately assess whether students are learning. Andragogical models are needed to assess whether students are effectively learning discipline specific knowledge and skills. Using models of adult learning, learning outcomes, and authentic assessment also potentially improve instructors' teaching skills.

Third, consensus and positive motivation facilitate evaluation. Consensus between the

numerous constituencies within and outside of academic units may often be unrealistic. Yet, universal agreement is not necessary if evaluations acknowledge the various needs and priorities, include exceptions or divergent approaches, and explain the rationales for decision-making. Consensus builders look for common elements, actively seek alternative ideas, and compose reports that clearly include input from all constituencies. This increases overall acceptance.

In addition, course evaluation is a characteristic of program growth and improvement and is most often an incremental process. It is easy to lose energy for ongoing curriculum evaluation since faculty members and administrators have many responsibilities and projects. Energy is created by conversations about the benefits of well designed curriculum, readiness plans for future accreditation reviews, sharing curiosity about effective teaching methods, and research that evaluates effective learning. Instead of a dreaded task that has to be done every decade or so, program assessment can become meaningful and satisfying.

A combination of the strategies discussed here can revitalize educational units by promoting group ownership, modeling methods for curriculum design, and adapting to diverse needs. They provide an innovative framework for addressing the many challenges associated with undergraduate program evaluation.

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Biography

James P. Coyle is an Assistant Professor in the School of Social Work at the University of Windsor in Windsor, Ontario. His research examines characteristics of family resilience and methods for designing curriculum that teaches career skills, particularly professional writing skills.