

Addressing the Finance Employment Skills Gap: Finance Major Redesign within an Integrated Business Curriculum

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ABSTRACT

During this session, I presented Walsh University's newly-redesigned undergraduate finance major and its place within the structured, integrated, and global business curriculum of the Walsh DeVille School of Business (DSoB). Most notably, the finance major gives voice to both external finance industry professionals and an external advisory board, enabling Walsh and its DSoB to better address the finance employment skills gap and prepare its students to either enter a graduate program, or begin a career working in a business firm or financial services.

INTRODUCTION

During this session, I highlighted how the DSoB embarked on its finance major redesign, the process of developing a program that is timely and consistent with current market conditions, and summarized those “threshold concepts” (Meyer and Land, 2003) and skills that emerged following interviews with many industry professionals, including retired and current corporate executives, money managers, investment bankers, and private equity professionals. The integrated curriculum pairs finance knowledge with analytical skills to solve global problems, and experiential learning is threaded throughout the program. As a result, the DSoB believes that its newly-redesigned finance major will meet the growing demand for experienced and adept finance professionals, improve the performance of both our professors and students, and elevate the status of Walsh’s DSoB in our pursuit of Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) accreditation.

AUDIENCE LEARNING OUTCOMES

Following the presentation, the audience was able to:

- Appreciate the challenges faculty faced in developing a new finance undergraduate major, as well as creating meaningful experiential learning opportunities for students;
- Synthesize those “threshold concepts” that emerged following our interviews with industry professionals and evaluate how these skills are taught in their home institution’s curriculum;
- Facilitate internal dialogue at their home institutions of not only finance curriculum redesign, but also individual course redesigns, in an effort to devise an integrated curriculum that embodies key themes such as those enacted at Walsh, featuring: (1) experiential learning; (2) integration of a global perspective, systems and sustainability,

- and responsibility; and (3) demonstration of achievement;
- Evaluate their home institution's finance curriculum to avoid overlap between courses, as having consistent course delivery and experiences across all platforms, regardless of the instructor or facilitator, is vital to ensuring an equitable student learning experience; and
- Recognize the importance of University mission in curriculum redesign.

ALIGNMENT WITH WALSH UNIVERSITY MISSION AND INTEGRATION WITHIN THE DSOB CURRICULUM

Walsh's mission is "to [educate] its students to become leaders in service to others through a values-based education with an international perspective in the Judeo-Christian tradition." In 2010, in an effort to align the business curriculum even more closely with our mission and to provide our students with a higher education that fosters critical thinking and effective communication, the School of Business redesigned its undergraduate curriculum with an academic plan (e.g., Stark and Lattuca, 1997) to embody three distinguishing characteristics: (1) experiential learning; (2) integration of three themes: a global perspective; systems and sustainability; and ethical, social, personal, and professional responsibility; and (3) demonstration of achievement. The DSoB achieves this mission by offering a timely, global, and integrated curriculum, with a particular emphasis on service learning and effective communication, as supported by the literature (Weber and Englehart, 2011). In consultation with an external advisory board, faculty, industry experts, and other interested stakeholders, the DSoB developed program student learning outcomes (PSLOs) for the undergraduate business curriculum. In addition, the DSoB designed a comprehensive assurance of learning (AoL) process and a detailed curriculum map, specifying in what courses the various PSLOs were introduced, reinforced, and mastered.

As Teece (2011, p. 506) has noted, integration of business school curriculum can be a challenge, specifically regarding economics and finance, because of the various assumptions that underlie the major fields. This is why it was so important for the DSoB to identify those "threshold concepts" in finance that students must be proficient in upon graduation, and that we can integrate throughout the business curriculum. With a particular emphasis on certain threshold concepts within the major, the students are better able to assimilate course material and achieve program learning outcomes.

As the DSoB embarked on redesigning its finance major during fall 2014, I interviewed retired and current corporate executives, money managers, investment bankers, commercial bankers, private equity professionals, alumni, our external advisory board, and current students in an attempt to determine those "threshold concepts" that finance major graduates require in order to be successful upon graduation. As Meyer and Land (2003, p. 4) have concluded, a threshold concept is "something distinct within what university teachers would typically describe as 'core concepts.'" They are transformative, irreversible, integrative, bounded, and potentially troublesome. Cousin (2006, p. 4) points out that a focus on such concepts allows educators to "make refined decisions about what is fundamental to a grasp of the subject they are teaching." As a result, the DSoB reached out to industry professionals to establish those threshold concepts for finance majors. The threshold concepts that emerged from these interviews are shown below:

| "Threshold Concepts" | |
|--------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------|
| <i>Valuation</i> | <i>Experience</i> |
| Basic accounting, economics, statistics | Risk Management |
| Domestic financial markets/institutions | International financial markets/institutions |
| Wealth creation | Ethics |
| Decision-making | <i>Statistical spreadsheet literacy</i> |
| <i>Effective communication (writing and oral)</i> | CFA Candidate Body of Knowledge |
| Exchange rates | Budgeting (Cash, Capital) |
| Financial Planning (Pro Forma and OCF) | Security Valuation |
| <i>Ability to communicate what is on a spreadsheet</i> | |

Several of these concepts are consistent with much of the literature. (Burrow and McIver, 2012; Davies and Mangan, 2008; Diamond and Smith, 2011; Yates and Ward, 2011). Those concepts that are italicized in the chart above were those that emerged in every interview that I conducted during fall 2014. When students are aware at the outset of those particular skills that will be acquired throughout their major course study, students will be better able to make an informative decision on whether they are particularly suited for a specific major (Pritchard, Potter, & Saccucci, 2010). Upon completion of the finance curriculum, we believe that our students will have received a mission-driven education and possess the necessary skills to succeed in a finance career.

FINANCE MAJOR CURRICULUM

The proposed curriculum was developed around the student learning outcomes (SLOs) below. Developed in consultation with professionals in the finance industry, these outcomes represent what a finance major should know and be able to do upon graduation from an undergraduate business program with a major in finance:

- SLO 1 A graduate with a specialization in finance will integrate financial knowledge with analytical skills to solve problems in a global business setting.
- SLO 2 A graduate with a specialization in finance will evaluate financial management theories and concepts and apply them to maximize the value of a business enterprise.
- SLO 3 A graduate with a specialization in finance will synthesize financial knowledge with financial analytical modeling to effectively value business enterprises.

The finance major curriculum supporting these learning outcomes consists of 24 required credit hours: 18 credit hours of major coursework, a minimum three credit hour internship, and a three credit hour elective. Considering that a school of Walsh's size has obvious limitations concerning the number of course offerings, the DSoB had to be fairly selective in its choice of required and elective courses:

| Finance Major Requirements | | | 21 Credit Hours | |
|----------------------------|-----------|----------------------------------------------|-----------------|---------------------------------|
| | ECON 312 | Money, Banking, and Monetary Policy | 3 | BCP II Status & ECON 203/204 |
| | BUS 350 | Intermediate Excel for Finance | 3 | BCP II Status |
| | BUS 351 | Global Finance | 3 | BCP II Status & BUS 363 |
| | BUS 385-F | Internship: Finance | 3 | BCP II Status |
| | BUS 451 | Seminar in Investments | 3 | BCP II Status & BUS 363 |
| | BUS 452 | Corp. Financial Mgmt. in a Global Environ II | 3 | BCP II Status & BUS 350/363 |
| | BUS 453 | Valuation | 3 | BCP II Status & BUS 350/363/452 |
| ELECTIVE: Choose One | | | 3 Credit Hours | |
| | BUS 456 | Mergers & Acquisitions | 3 | BUS 350/363 |
| | BUS 457 | Advanced Portfolio Management | 3 | BUS 350/363/451/452 |

The redesigned finance major will require students to take a variety of classes from the finance discipline that will prepare them well for a finance-related career. Major course work begins in year three, where the undergraduate curriculum shifts from an emphasis on business engagement and traditional classroom instruction to a greater concentration on experiential learning and instruction within the finance major. Although students still receive traditional classroom instruction, the curriculum places a greater importance on the students' application of their classroom instruction through hands-on learning experiences. Our redesigned finance major sets the DSoB apart from many of its peers through its unique offerings and timeliness. And further, faculty involvement in curriculum development, particularly the finance major, allows for curriculum and the courses within to maintain the greatest amount of relevance for students and faculty. By involving external stakeholders and industry professionals in course and curriculum development, we believe this will ultimately enhance the education of our emerging finance professionals.

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