Creating An Undergraduate E-Commerce Concentration: A Case Study

Prakash L. Dheeriya, Ph D.
Chair & Professor of Finance
Department of Finance & Quantitative Methods
California State University-Dominguez Hills
1000 E Victoria St
Carson, CA 90747
Ph: 310-243-3350
Ph: 310-217-6964 (Fax)
Email: pdheeriya@soma.csudh.edu

And

Ted Azarmi, Ph D.
Assistant Professor of Finance
Department of Finance
California State University-Long Beach
Long Beach, CA 90840

Abstract

Due to falling enrollment at a school of management, many options were considered to rectify the problem. One of the solutions proposed was to create a concentration in e-commerce (which was subsequently changed to e-business). This paper details the steps taken by the task force to realize that objective. The process of creating the e-business concentration is not yet complete, as the proposal is yet to be evaluated by curriculum committees.

Keywords: E-commerce, curriculum.

Low enrollments in any school on a campus is cause for serious concern. At a school of business in Los Angeles[i], enrollments had fallen by approximately 25 % over the past 4 years, even though nearby universities had impacted enrollments in their corresponding business schools. One of the solutions proposed was to eliminate the POM (Production and Operations Management) concentration. The POM concentration had a track record of declining enrollments and was expected to be axed. The POM concentration was successfully deleted from the business program. Another solution proposed by a member of the POM faculty was to create a concentration in technology management, which the dean liked, but due to a lack of pro-active attitude of the POM faculty, that option never came to fruition. A member of the finance faculty, who had her own e-commerce operations, suggested the introduction of e-commerce concentration. This suggestion was accepted overwhelmingly by most faculty in the department and the process of creation of that concentration started rolling.

In this paper, we will discuss the steps undertaken by that business school to start a concentration in e-business. That concentration will be offered in Fall 2001. Steps to reach the current stage by themselves are interesting and noteworthy. Results of this case study will be useful to schools contemplating introducing such a concentration.

The following steps were undertaken (listed in chronological order): **1. Creation of "Introduction to E-commerce" and "Introduction to Technology Management" courses for possible inclusion in course offerings in Fall 2000 semester:** The chair of the department of Finance (hereafter "the chair") decided to create a course in e-commerce and in technology management, hoping that such an action will serve as "a foot in the door" to an e-commerce concentration. The course proposal forms were submitted to the School Curriculum Committee (SCC) in October 1999. At that meeting, the SCC rejected those proposals claiming that the department of finance does not have jurisdiction over those areas. The chair explained to the dean the reasoning behind creation of those 2 courses, as they would spark students' interest in e-commerce. Before submitting the proposals, the chair decided to conduct a survey of students of his departmental faculty (See Appendix A and B for a copy of the survey instrument) and use the results as a lever for subsequent inclusion of those courses. That strategy did not work with the one representative on the SCC.

2. Formation of Focus Group on E-commerce: The dean of the SOM suggested that an advisory board of e-commerce professionals be formed, and that they be invited to a focus group meeting. The objective of such a meeting was to determine what industry expected from an e-commerce curriculum. The chair approached several dot-com companies in the Los Angeles region and sent them e-mails in which he sought their participation in the focus group (See Appendix C for a copy of the email message). List of dot-com companies were obtained by performing a keyword search on "e-commerce" and "internet" in the local version of www.yahoo.com. Over 60 companies were approached and over 20 companies responded favorably. A letter of invitation to join the focus group was then sent through the dean's office (See Appendix D). A date, location and time was fixed for the focus group. (October 30, 1999, a Saturday, at 9.30 a.m. with lunch provided)

3. Focus Group Meetings: Since the chair had never conducted a focus group meeting, he asked the dean for suggestions on the conduct of focus group. The dean suggested using marketing faculty to conduct a focus group. The chair contacted two marketing faculty members (one of whom was in the SOM CC) and they did not express any interest in leading the focus group. (See Appendix E) A couple of focus group participants did not show up on the day of the meeting. Further, the tape recorder did not function properly. Format of the focus group was open-ended and the participants responded quite enthusiastically. The membership of the focus group was quite diverse; it included CEOs and Vice-Presidents of local dot com companies. The dean was pleased with the diversity of the focus group. The chair distributed a summary of the focus group proceedings to the participants by e-mail (See Appendix F).

A second focus group meeting was proposed by the dean and invitations to that focus group were sent. The second focus group meeting had only 4 industry participants (of which one of them was a new member to the group) and it was held on December 11, 1999. The chair distributed a handout containing course offerings in e-commerce at other universities so that the group could develop potential courses. After much discussion, the group elected one of the members to draft a curriculum of possible course offerings in our proposed concentration. That member distributed his proposal (See Appendix G) Being worried that such courses will be taught by academicians who have no experience in e-commerce, another member distributed a list of requirements for instructors teaching e-commerce courses in such a concentration (See Appendix H). The dean subsequently distributed an e-mail message to his faculty about his intention of starting an E-commerce Task Force (See Appendix I). However, among the faculty he asked to serve on the task force, on e-business, only 1 expressed an intention to serve. (See Appendix J) Other members of the task force later complained that they were never invited to meetings of the task force. The issue of task force membership was finally resolved and the task force started meeting in April 2000.

The task force finally decided on the structure of the e-commerce curriculum. It was to comprise of 2 tracks: managerial and technical. Core courses that students in e-commerce concentration have to take are (a) Internet Marketing (b) Logistics Management (c) Introduction to Network Based Applications (d) Capstone Course (involving development of a commercial web site). In the managerial track, students will have the option of taking three out of the following four courses: (a) Venture capital financing (b) Managerial Issues in E-commerce (c) Internet Advertising (d) Legal Issues in E-commerce. In the technical track, students will have the option of taking three out of the following 4 courses: (a) Business Programming (b) Advanced Network Based Applications (c) Database Management (d) Any course on sound, video or graphic arts. Students in either track will have the option of taking an elective course out of managerial or technical track. The objective of having two tracks was to cater to needs of the students: do they want to be employees of dot com companies or be entrepreneurs themselves? During the deliberations, a member of the task force compiled a list of e-commerce programs around the nation. The task force looked at university programs on e-commerce that were available via the internet.

In August 2000, the task force met with the members of the advisory board for the first time. At that meeting, the advisory board members provided input on the curriculum structure proposed by the task force. The advisory board offered numerous suggestions, including some which were very unconventional from an academic point of view. One such suggestion was to create a "Salon" where students in e-commerce concentration will meet with industry representatives on a very informal level, in a networking mixer. The advisory board took their suggestions to the dean, but they could not be implemented since those Advisory Board suggestions would increase the number of units students will have to take. It was decided that this concentration should have 8 or 9 three-unit courses, and anything more would be difficult to pass through the subsequent levels of review. A member of the advisory board offered to write up a grant proposal that would help fund the concentration. He promised to consult a colleague and will assist the task force in getting funding for implementation of the e-commerce concentration. Currently, the task force is meeting in September 2000 to decide on the final structure of the e-commerce curriculum. The necessary forms for introducing a new concentration will be filled and put forward to the necessary curriculum committee levels. The process of creating an e-commerce concentration is fraught with turf wars, ego problems and bureaucratic hassles. Care and diligence is advised to those contemplating such a change.

---

[i] Due to privacy concerns, names of participants are kept hidden. Appendices will be made available in the final version.