Obstacles to successful curriculum management in higher education and opportunities for improvement

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Abstract

Curriculum change is needed to achieve high-quality learning resulting from economic, social, and political innovations. Therefore, effective curriculum management is a critical component of higher education. Previous literature reveals obstacles and opportunities regarding the curriculum management process. This paper reviews the resources implemented as a result of a survey conducted to assess the curriculum processes at a private university to remove barriers from the curriculum management process.

Keywords: curriculum change, curriculum management, innovation, assessment, higher education.

Introduction

Changes to a university's curriculum are a byproduct of continuous improvement. Such change occurs due to economic, social, and political innovations that render the previous curriculum less effective and outdated after some time (Law, 2022). The curriculum is updated to increase the value of student learning and university outcomes, ensuring the highest quality of learning is achieved (Yidana & Aboagye, 2018). Accordingly, curriculum management is how curriculum change proposals are initiated and reviewed. For this paper, curriculum management is the practical and educational change process that institutions use to update their program curricula.

For curriculum management in higher education to be successful, it "can only be approached within the framework of the educational management of the institution as a whole" (Barrón-Tirado & Barriga, 2016). Literature highlights that effective curriculum management must consider the stakeholders' needs to ensure collective success (Curee, 2010; Jones & Anderson, 2001; Rudhumbu, 2015). As Yidana and Aboagye (2018) found, "embracing curriculum as a shared responsibility among faculty and administration led to widespread participation" (p. 41). Additionally, with adequate implementation strategies, change in the university curriculum "plays a crucial role in fostering healthy learning and facilitating global competitiveness" (Law, 2022, p.16). However, the need to reform curriculum management processes stems from gaps between intentions and actions (Howson & Kingsbury, 2021). Rudhumbu's (2015) research found that academic middle

managers overseeing curriculum processes "faced challenges in both the planning and implementation of curriculum change" due to inadequate resources and training (p. 422). Such contexts highlight the obstacles to successful curriculum change and the need to evaluate current efforts. Therefore, this paper reviews the resources implemented as a result of a survey conducted to assess the curriculum processes at a private university to remove barriers from the curriculum management process.

Background

The curriculum management process at the selected university is a critical examination of proposed changes to academic programs and courses to optimize student learning. This process is led collaboratively by individuals who teach within the program, the office of Educational Effectiveness, and other relevant stakeholders. Curriculum management plays a crucial role in accountability, collaboration, standardization, and innovation to improve the student learning experience (Barrón-Tirado & Barriga, 2016; Buchanan, 2008; Rudhumbu, 2015). The submission process allows the academic units of the university an outlet to submit proposals for edits, deletions, and new ideas to the university curriculum in their respective area. Effective curriculum management is a critical component of higher education and as such, having the right infrastructure to support curricular change properly is necessary. The office of Educational Effectiveness at this university administered a survey in the Spring of 2022 to the faculty, staff, and administrators involved to assess the current curriculum management process.

Investigation

According to Jones and Anderson (2001), "giving high priority to curriculum change is the first step to creating an environment where effective change can take place" (p. 5). In an attempt to mirror this concept, the purpose of the survey was to assess the current curriculum process, find barriers, and improve these systems for the next academic year. After administering the survey to stakeholders and receiving the results, several obstacles burdened the process.

Obstacles. Barriers to successful curriculum management can include "inadequate training regarding curriculum implementation, lack of guidelines for managing and monitoring the implementation of curriculum changes, and the complexity of managing new changes in the existing curriculum" (Yidana & Aboagye, 2018, p.42). The survey revealed the following obstacles to current curriculum management processes:

- Lack of user communication (deadlines, requirements, processes, etc.)
- Absence of proper training or tutorials
- Complicated processes on the curriculum web-based system
- No standards to regulate or guide the process

Though the received responses varied in phrasing, these four themes were the most prevalent barriers noted by stakeholders.

Opportunities. The feedback prompted an undertaking of change to remove existing barriers facing the people and processes. As Yidana and Aboagye also found, "different stakeholders experience the curriculum [process] from their point of view and are often only aware of a part of all important aspects

building the curriculum" (p.42). Therefore, since the individuals surveyed similarly found that these four barriers were impeding the process, it became pertinent that they are addressed. The curriculum manager in the office of Educational Effectiveness began a practical plan to address these concerns specifically. Buchanan's study (2008) suggested that the "management of curriculum change is likely to be more effective when [stakeholders] are wholly engaged in the process" (p. 44). Thus, the lack of communication resulted in unnecessary barriers to the process. In response to this, the curriculum manager increased email frequency for upcoming deadlines to all stakeholders and increased communications to proposal originators and those involved in the process on when proposals needed approval or received full approval from the necessary committees. Also, this feedback identified that a centralized location for communication was absent; therefore, a curriculum page was developed on the university website to streamline information on deadlines and meeting dates, important notifications, and visuals to aid in understanding the processes.

Literature found that leadership was essential to the curriculum change process (Rudhumbu, 2015; Jones & Anderson, 2001). The processes lacked a clear leadership component to bridge the gap between stakeholders. The curriculum manager thus implemented one-on-one consultations/training to offer individualized support and assistance in the curriculum proposal process. Moreover, recorded video tutorials were made available. The tutorial videos are designed to assist individuals who have attended training, require a refresher course on a particular form, and assist those new to the curriculum process. The video tutorials break down various aspects of the process and discuss the required information. The intent of these tutorials is not only to assist but also to provide training that is more specific to the stakeholder's potential needs.

Additionally, the university utilizes a cloud-based curriculum management system for all curricular changes. Stakeholders can originate proposals for change in the system and track the progress as it progresses through the workflow to obtain necessary approvals. The responses revealed that the system is seldomly intuitive and can be confusing when inputting information into the proposals. Therefore, a support page with downloadable resources was designed. The page was linked to the new curriculum website and shared with stakeholders. To further address this concern, the proposal forms used for curriculum change submissions were reviewed and paired down for ease of understanding and access.

In response to the concerns of a lack of standards to regulate and guide the curriculum process, the creation of a curriculum handbook began underway. The primary purpose of this handbook is to outline the university's process and policies for curriculum revision, allowing stakeholders to effectively and productively work towards achieving the school's vision and mission for curricular change. Elements of the handbooks will include an outline of the curriculum process and the stakeholders' roles/responsibilities, degree program expectations, and course development best practices.

Research proves that providing the appropriate support to achieve change leads to success (Curee, 2010; Rudhumbu, 2015). The planning and implementation of these resources resulted from the identification of shortcomings in the current processes. Accordingly, yearly assessment surveys will reveal if the resources implemented were successful or if further intervention is required to continually improve the curriculum management process.

Identified Obstacle	Opportunity for Improvement
Lack of user communication (on deadlines, requirements, processes, etc.)	Increased email frequency for upcoming deadlines Developed a curriculum website to streamline information
Absence of proper training or tutorials	Implementation of one-on-one consultations/trainings Recorded video tutorials made available
Complicated processes on the curriculum web-based system	Designed a support page with downloadable resources Paired down the proposal forms for easier submissions
No standards to regulate or guide the process	Creation of a curriculum handbook

Conclusion

The literature revealed that curriculum management processes could have significant challenges associated with the current systems. Therefore, assessment and planned improvement are critical indicators for successful curriculum management. To promote effective practices, curriculum managers must know how their current practices limit stakeholders. By evaluating current procedures and implementing change accordingly, curriculum managers can go the extra mile and create conditions for success. The survey administered at the selected university revealed several obstacles that impeded current processes, and as a result, modifications to the process were implemented. The table below illustrates the identified obstacles in the curriculum management process and the corresponding opportunity for improvement. Curriculum managers throughout higher education can achieve successful curriculum change through these continuous improvement strategies.

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