

A Business School Overhauls Its Curriculum to Meet the Pace of Change

● “If you don’t do it, you’re going to be irrelevant,” says the vice dean for graduate programs at USC’s Marshall School.

by Mary Ellen Egan

At the University of Southern California’s Marshall School of Business, a curriculum revamp two years in the making will be unveiled in late August. Suh-Pyng Ku, the vice dean for graduate programs who led the effort, says that while faculty revisit and tweak their own course materials, an in-depth review of the structure of the MBA program and every required course offered hadn’t been conducted in six years.

“Curriculum change is hard,” Ku says. “But if you don’t do it, you’re going to be irrelevant or not competitive.” That’s a challenge for all business schools. “Students gauge where they will attend based on the curriculum, and in order for the school to be competitive, they need to be on the cutting edge of what they are offering,” says Deena Maerowitz, who oversees the college and graduate school advising practice at the Bertram Group, an education consulting company.

In the spring of 2017, Ku began soliciting input about Marshall’s MBA courses from students, faculty, alumni, and employers/recruiters. In their survey responses, students described the first term as crammed, leaving them feeling pressured and ill-prepared in core subjects such as accounting. The pacing, they said, was too fast. “We wondered if we were sacrificing their long-term success by compressing so much into the first year,” says Gareth James, a data sciences and operations professor and one of seven faculty members on the curriculum committee Ku convened in November.

One adjustment that’s coming in response to the feedback: More time will be devoted to core subjects. That was a tricky task, several committee members say, given their desire to achieve a more balanced mix of quantitative courses—finance and statistics—with qualitative ones, such as communications and marketing. Another objective was to give students more time to learn the harder, numbers-driven material. So accounting and finance courses were extended into the second semester.

“We would challenge each other,” Ku says, describing the discussions about what should stay and what should go. “But in the end, it’s not about the importance of my discipline or your discipline, but what do the students need.” Adds James: “There is always a concern that people will try to protect their own turf. But we spent a lot of time hearing everyone out. Ultimately, the goal was to create a well-rounded program.”

Concerns about jobs were expressed in many of the student surveys, according to Bridget Hellige, one of two student representatives on the curriculum committee. That’s not surprising—students want well-paying, meaningful work after getting their MBA. And they’ll choose a school with a curriculum that they believe offers greater chances for success, Bertram Group’s Maerowitz says. Less obvious to some committee members, though, were specific aspects of the job search. They discovered that a practice known as casing—when prospective employers present interviewees with a hypothetical business problem to solve—is a source of great stress, according to Hellige. The feedback led to the development of a course to better prepare students to tackle the hypotheticals. Structured Analysis for Unstructured Problems is a one-credit class that will use lectures, case reviews, and other exercises to teach students how to frame problems and deal with incomplete information. Also, given the issues raised about career guidance, Marshall is adding required career services seminars for all MBA students.

The first draft of the curriculum proposal was presented to the full faculty in early March for another round of feedback, and by the end of

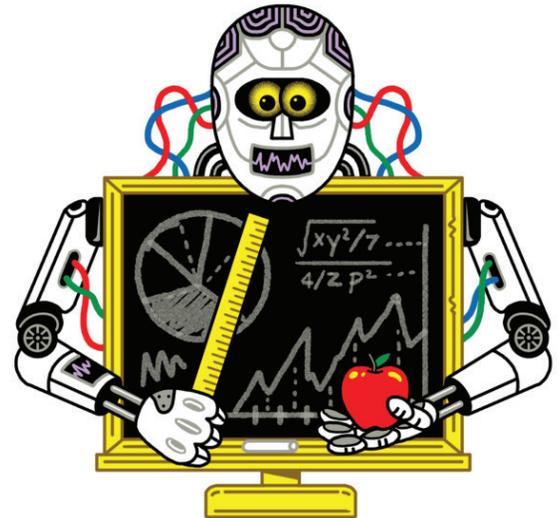


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that month they voted overwhelmingly in favor of the plan. Ku says she’s “cautiously optimistic” about the changes. Her work and that of several faculty will continue through the summer, refining and fleshing out course details. Beyond the course changes, the committee also created a structure to formally review course offerings more frequently. “There’s frustration in academia in general, that if a course hasn’t been performing, do you cut your losses or wait another two to three years to see if it catches on?” James says. “But if you change the process, you can switch out as needed.”

Says Ku: “It would be hard for people to argue that what we’re doing isn’t the right thing.”

BOTTOM LINE - The fast pace of change in the business world is putting pressure on B-schools, including USC’s Marshall School of Business, to revamp their curricula.