

Implementing a Successful Undergraduate Introduction Course Representing Two Majors

Scott D. Scheer, Professor
Scheer.9@osu.edu

Amanda Bowling, Assistant Professor
Bowling.175@osu.edu

Rachael A. Ramsier, Lecturer
Ramsier.7@osu.edu

Jera E. Niewoehner-Green, Assistant Professor
Niewoehner-Green.1@osu.edu

Department of Agricultural Communication, Education, and Leadership
Agricultural Technical Institute (ATI)
The Ohio State University
Columbus, OH 43210 & Wooster, OH 44691

Implementing a Successful Undergraduate Introduction Course Representing Two Majors

Introduction and Need for Innovation

Courses for students new to a major, including freshman and transfer students, can serve as a way to connect them to faculty and orient them in their career trajectory. Participation in college and career success courses has been identified as one predictor of postsecondary success (Leinbach & Jenkins, 2008). As students enter into their major some are still unsure about their chosen field of study and actively exploring career paths. Majors such as Agricultural Education, Agricultural Communication, and Leadership may offer their own introductory courses while being part of one department. Issues that could arise from such arrangements include inconsistencies in degree requirements, competition for students, small enrollment in the courses, less student communication amongst majors but an overlap in professional needs, and lack of department and student cohesion.

Departments in the field of agricultural social sciences across the United States typically offer content in agricultural education, leadership, and communication. How these departments are structured by content areas or major varies depending on department structure and course offerings. The Department of Agricultural Communication, Education, and Leadership (ACEL) at The Ohio State University mirror others across the country in that multiple majors are offered under one department across two campuses. As such, faculty have to be intentional in how introductory courses are offered to meet the needs of students across majors.

Methods

As the ACEL experienced leadership and faculty transitions, faculty were encouraged to explore innovative ways to improve our curriculum along with course structure and composition. Specific emphasis was placed on revising the undergraduate introduction course. The revision of the introduction course focused on three factors: a) addressing all student needs within the department regardless of major, b) creating consistent student experience regardless of campus, and c) utilizing the expertise of multiple faculty members through team teaching. Since the department offers three undergraduate majors of Agricultural Communication, Agricultural Science Education, and Community Leadership, the introduction course had to meet the needs of students within the various majors. In addition, the course needed to align with the same one taught at our college's associate degree granting unit which has its own academic campus. Students will often transfer from the associate degree granting campus to complete their bachelor's degree on the main campus; therefore, creating alignment benefits both students and faculty. The input and collaboration from faculty there were critical for this transition, as the resulting change of courses were implemented on both campus academic programs. The faculty instructors (from both campuses) meet regularly before, during, and after the course for continuous quality improvement.

During the revision of the introduction course we explored using team teaching within a multi-major course. Various studies have found advantages related to team teaching such as students large undergraduate classes valued diverse expertise and teaching styles (Hanusch, Obijiofor, & Volcic, 2009), another study on team-teaching across multiple undergraduate classes of the same

course found the most critical factor for success was the composition of the instructors on the team (Yanamandram & Noble, 2005). Also, research on co-teaching with two instructors has indicated not only positive results for students but also the instructors (Bacharach & Heck, 2007). Based on the research literature and our own experiences, we developed a multi-major, team taught introduction course across two campuses.

Results

From the research literature and best practices for teaching and learning the following key components were implemented for an innovative and comprehensive approach:

1. Significant overlap between introductory areas in Agricultural Science Education and Community Leadership (included Extension Education) resulted in one course
2. Co-teach combined introduction course
3. Focus on common aspects of the two majors rather than differences
4. Equal faculty involvement for Agricultural Science Education and Community Leadership including guest lectures presented by faculty who are not the course instructors
5. Encourage unity among students as part of one department

Reflections on course assignments and student evaluation of instruction indicated that students perceived the course as a beneficial introduction to the department, their major, and their potential future career field and created a community of students regardless of major. The co-teaching approach by our faculty has been successful based on evidence from student evaluation reports, recruitment of new students, and overall unity within the department. The innovative teaching and learning strategies utilized in this course have resulted in positive outcomes for students which we believe can also benefit students in similar departments in the U.S. and beyond.

Future Plans & Advice to Others

Our future plans are to potentially combine the two courses which are taught across two campuses into a team-taught course using virtual and distance technology. This arrangement would provide even more consistency and cohesion between students, faculty, and campus environments. General advice is to be open to various course structures and format beyond the usual strategies of instruction.

Costs/Resources

The greatest cost is of time and funds with the involvement of experienced faculty members, however that is offset by the benefits of team teaching, encouraging department wide unity, and focusing on similarities between majors rather than differences. The course utilizes the university's online learning management system for exchange of readings, visuals, presentation notes, and assignment submissions. All course resources including syllabus, readings, and assignments will be shared during the poster presentation along with active dialogue between presenters and conference participants.

References

- Bacharach, N., & Heck, T. W. (2007). Co-teaching in higher education. *Journal of College Teaching and Learning*, 4(10), 19-26.
- Hanusch, F., Obijiofor, L., & Volcic, Z. (2009). Theoretical and practical issues in team-teaching a large undergraduate class. *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, 21(1), 66-74.
- Leinbach, D.T., & Jenkins, D. (2008). Using longitudinal data to increase community college student success: A guide to measuring milestone and momentum point attainment. *Community College Research Center Research Tools*, No. 2. New York: Teachers College, Community College Research Center.
- Yanamandram, V. K., & Noble, G. I. (2005). Team teaching: Student reflections of its strengths and weaknesses. In R. Atkinson & J. Hobson (Eds.), *Teaching and Learning Forum: The Reflective Practitioner* (pp. 1 – 10). Australia: Murdoch University.