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Professional Association Attendance as a Course Requirement

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Abstract

This chapter looks at the value of including a structured attendance at a professional association event as a mandatory course requirement. The requirement is compared to other approaches and how they support soft-skill course and program outcomes that are sometimes challenging to support in the curriculum. The paper discusses how the assignment can be structured and how the structure supports the intended outcomes.

Professional Association Attendance as a Course Requirement

At City University of Seattle (CityU), one of the institutional learning goals is that CityU graduates are lifelong learners. This, or a similar goal, is common among colleges and universities and for specific program outcomes. The challenge is finding ways to attain this goal, which needs to be obtained by introducing students to tools of learning and building beneficial habits. These habits cannot be artificial or unique to the academic environment or else they will simply fade outside of the schoolhouse doors. One technique to achieve this goal in a sustainable manner is to require the use of attendance at a networking event of a professional association. If well structured, this assignment has the potential for a significant impact on the student.

Professional Associations—Recognized Value to Students

Schools have long recognized the value of student and faculty interaction with professional associations. Faculty membership and participation have been recognized as a contribution to scholarship and have been a factor in faculty ratings and even consideration for promotion and tenure. Some schools, such as the University of California (University of California, 2006) use faculty memberships in professional associations as a factor in assessing the attainment of institutional goals. Weber State University, in its Health Information Technology Program, requires, as a part of faculty development, "at least one State or National HIM professional association meeting attendance" (Weber State University, 2012). Other universities recognize the value of faculty participation through the granting of time to attend professional association meetings and even the reimbursement of the costs of attendance and membership.

The value of student participation with professional associations is also well established in the educational community. Many universities host and encourage membership in student chapters and sections of professional associations directly related to their programs, such as the Institute of Electrical and Electronic Engineers (IEEE), the Association of Computing Machinery (ACM), The Accounting Association, Guerrilla Marketing Society, American Psychological Association (APA), etc. These student sections are "[b]ridging the gap between the academic and professional worlds" (Boston University School of Management, n.d.).

Generally, these student societies tend in one of two directions, student emulation of a professional environment and alumni/university friend networking-focused. The student emulation type of involvement often includes faculty and outside involvement. The focus is on projects and activities that put the students into leadership or other roles where they can practice their academic skills, often in a competitive environment. Sometimes these associations are even incorporated within a for-credit course. While these are highly valuable to the students as a learning experience and also provide them with an excellent source for networking for their next job, their value in instilling lifelong learning is more limited. In addition, the number of students participating in these experiences may be limited.

These types of activities are viewed by the student as a student experience, not as a lifelong learning experience. Once the competition is over, students leave the university, or they secure a job, thus the objective has been met and the incentive for continued involvement fades. Once students are in the "real world" applying what they learned in their emulation, they are in a new phase and no longer have the need to emulate; the activity is put aside.

The networking-focused student associations are also a valuable tool for students. In these organizations, the typical meeting features a guest speaker on a topic of interest and time designated for networking. Alumni and friends of the university are invited to these events and are encouraged to network and mingle with the students. In the best cases, such as in the Master of Accountancy Program at the Villanova University School of Business (Villanova University, School of Business, n.d.), students take a Networking Skills Workshop and then attend the alumni networking event as a part of a required professional development program.

As with the emulation approach, alumni/friends networking can be of great value to students, both in attending learning events outside of the classroom, in beginning to develop some networking skills and in potentially finding a first job. However, this approach also falls somewhat short of instilling a habit of lifelong learning; in the students' view it as an academic or preparatory activity that lasts only through graduation, or perhaps returning as alumni, rather than the beginning of a continuing professional habit.

Outside of these more formal programs, universities take steps to involve their students in professional association activities. Most, at a minimum, encourage student membership in professional

associations. In some programs, such as the PsyD program in Clinical Psychology at the University of the Rockies (University of the Rockies, n.d.), students are required to join the professional association as student members. Many schools with mandatory class attendance allow students to attend professional associations in lieu of class. The Graduate School of Education at Pennsylvania State University even provides assistance, up to $150 for twenty students annually to attend conferences and other professional association activities (Graduate School of Education, n.d.). All of this is very positive for the student, however, it doesn't translate to all students; much of what they do is left to the initiative of the students themselves and the tie into continuing association is limited.

Given the recognition of the value of professional associations for students in continuing their lifetime of learning and development, it is important to look for a means which involves the full student population and which also builds a habit they will continue once they leave the halls of academia. To do this, attendance at professional associations as a mandatory assignment in selected courses is a viable option. To make the assignment more effective though, structure and reflection need to be added to the exercise. Two examples from two different courses will be used to demonstrate:

Example Assignments

The first example is from a course in Global Marketing at Northwest University. In this course the students were given the assignment:

> Attend two or more meetings of an international trade organization or similar event with a global orientation. During the course of the meeting, talk to and obtain a business card from at least five different attendees at each of the meetings. Following the meetings, provide a copy of each business card and a paragraph or two describing each individual. In the information explain why the person was attending the event, what the person does, and ways in which you may interact with the person in a business capacity in the future (Fretheim, 2010).

The requirements of the assignment were designed to ensure the maximum possible involvement of the student in the meeting. For example, it

is unlikely that a student could obtain the cards or information about the people met without actually talking with someone. The minimum required number of cards ensures that the student doesn't merely connect with one person for the duration of the event. The exercise also reinforces the content of the course by requiring that the event be global in nature.

This assignment was conducted from 2005 to 2010 in an evening MBA course composed primarily of adult learners. In addition to the instruction, students were given a list of about twenty-five events during the course of the quarter and sources for discovering additional events. During classes, there was instruction and discussion on networking and its value as a business practice. Much of this was in the context of global cultures and being sensitive to issues such as the manner of address, the placement of the feet, and formalities of presenting cards in some cultures.

The second example is from the capstone courses in the Technology Institute at City University of Seattle. These courses, and some of their predecessors, have had an assignment that required students to participate in professional networking meetings since 2011. The requirement follows:

> Each quarter students will be required to attend a minimum of two professional organization meetings or functions related to the student's study. Examples of professional organization include IEEE, IEEE Computer Society, ACM, IAPSC, ISSA, etc. One of these two meetings may be a general business, or business networking meeting or function. The meetings or functions must be face-to-face engagements. However, in exceptional circumstances (deployed to remote locations, on assignment in Antarctica, etc.) the instructor may approve the substitution of online activities on an individual basis.
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> After attending the event, the student will prepare a brief summary of the experience. The summary must include: Meeting Identification—Title, Date, and Location. Attendance—How many? What types of people? How many did you personally speak to? General Description (one to two paragraphs)—What was the purpose of the activity? Did anything exciting happen? Reflection (one to two paragraphs)—What did you take away from the meeting? How can/did participation contribute to your professional career? Would you attend another meeting (why/why not)? (City University of Seattle, 2012–13)

This assignment differs slightly from the MBA course assignment. First, there is no specific target given for the number of people with whom the student needed to interact. This is part of an overall orientation slightly away from networking and more toward professional development and continuous learning. The need to talk with people is still present though and is expressed through the questions the student is expected to respond to in their summary.

This assignment also varies in that it is generally given in an online course with limited mandatory discussions. The remainder of the course is used for student teams to work on the design, implementation, and testing of capstone projects. As a result, while there is some online discussion on networking and events, the discussion is more limited.

As with the other assignment, students are provided with a list of potential events and information on how to locate others. In this course the latter is usually more important as students are located around the country and around the world. Despite being an online course, the emphasis is on face-to-face events. One potential future change is to add a requirement for a third event in an online environment.

Like the other assignment, this one makes a point of the events and associations being related to the student's area of study. This is important from a networking and professional development perspective, and it puts many students outside of their comfort zone. These students may be enthusiastic about attending a general event with their friends and peers from their current experience, but in going to an event related to their studies, it begins the transformation process of students seeing themselves as a part of the profession they are studying.

Finally, the requested summary in the newer assignment is more reflective and focused on the event as a whole rather than the individuals encountered at the event. This is both more reflective of the nature of the types of students, and of the intent to strengthen the focus on professional development.

Comparisons to Other Approaches

The first observation is that both of these are mandatory assignments. While universities have long encouraged student attendance at professional activities, there is a significant difference between mandatory and optional approaches. With an optional approach, the students who do attend are those who already have the strongest self-confidence and willingness to try new adventures. Those who can benefit the most, from discovering something they may not on their own, from breaking out of their shell, or from developing their own self-confidence are the least likely to participate in an optional event.

Students who do not have this as a mandatory assignment can find all sorts of excuses for not participating. Some raise the issue of costs, but available no-cost events have been identified. Other students weigh the opportunity cost of time spent on an event in comparison to time spent on homework or, given the majority are adult learners, time spent with family. In those comparisons, the short-term benefits may appear to outweigh the longer-term benefits of professional association and continued learning. Making the event mandatory dramatically alters the equation.

Another question is the potential benefit of a professional association versus a student event. General observations have been that the students are much more positive and enthusiastic about their experiences with professional organizations. One would expect that regardless of whether the student is an adult learner or traditional student, the growing sense of becoming a part of a profession has significance.

In an online context there is an additional benefit of using the professional association. Online students are geographically spread. Even if the students were in the same area, the nonsynchronous nature of the courses means that there will be students who would find it difficult to attend a student event at a specific time. As there are numerous professional events available, both geographically as well as chronologically spread, students have more options to find an opportunity that better fits their schedule.

Several weeks ago, I was attending a professional conference that was also attended by a group of students from another university as a class trip. While it is unknown if the trip was mandatory, it was interesting to observe the behavior of the group. They came in together, sat as a group, and conversed among themselves. At one point a member of the group said to the instructor, "go do your talk to people thing, we'll be here." Finally, at the end of a very interesting technical presentation, the group got up and left together. They missed a significant portion of the value of the event.

The behavior of the student group is one that the design of the assignments attempts to avoid. First, it is not a group activity; it is an individual activity, though that doesn't preclude several individuals attending an event

together. This has happened, although in these cases the students who attended together have had different experiences. This difference has been driven in part by the requirement to meet other people—either explicit or implied, and by the need to write about the experience afterward.

Student Reactions

The reaction of students to these assignments has been extremely positive in both courses. Some of the students enthusiastically approach the assignment from the beginning and fulfill the requirements early in the quarter. These are usually the same students who would actively participate in a voluntary program. The other extreme is students who wait until the very last week of the quarter. These students may raise issue after issue as reasons why they are not able to complete the assignment and do so only after they see no other way to avoid it.

Once they have broken the ice and attended the first event, even the most ardent of the avoiders has had no problem with attending another event and completing the assignment (other than locating the next event in a hurry). Some of these students have expressed in their course reviews or in discussions that this was the most valuable assignment in the course and one of the most valuable in their program.

Other than anecdotal feedback from students, there hasn't yet been a concerted effort to measure the success of the approach. Ultimately this would require feedback from alumni on their continued attendance at professional association events and a comparison with a control group. In the short term and as a potential tool for measuring a program outcome, a survey could be conducted of the students to check whether they have voluntarily attended events since the completion of the assignment.

Summary

Including required professional association meetings is an excellent way of providing support for program and course outcomes such as "lifelong learning" and "contribution to the profession" that are otherwise challenging to include as part of a curriculum. The mandatory aspect ensures that not only those students who willingly volunteer participate, but also those who tend to be less willing and who perhaps need the additional encouragement the most. Building careful structure and the need for reflection into the assignment ensures that engagement with professional organizations provides value to the student

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