

## A Course Every Department Can (Should?) Teach—Graduating Senior Survey

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### Abstract

A Graduating Senior Survey course has been required of Agricultural Business majors at Iowa State University since 1997. Specific course goals include collecting valuable outcomes assessment information while, at the same time, assisting graduating seniors with various graduation issues. The format of this course is intended to facilitate the administration of an academic program rather than to disseminate specific, subject-matter knowledge. As such, experiences and observations from past offerings of this course should have widespread appeal and relevance.

### Introduction

Over the years, this NACTA Journal has promoted the professional advancement of college-level teaching in agriculture through the sharing of ideas in published articles dealing with, among other things, not only innovative teaching techniques but also new and interesting courses. The goal of this article is to add to the literature dealing with innovative course offerings.

A number of course-related articles in this journal over the past decade have dealt with discipline-specific courses. Examples have included an agricultural cooperative business course (Raven, Bishop, and Wright, 1994), an international agribusiness management course (Akridge, Erickson, Boehlje, and Kazragyte, 1996), an integrated course in agricultural biology (Ferguson and Chapman, 1996), an animal science discovery course for freshmen (Kesler, 1997), an introductory food science course (Murano and Knight, 1999), a graduate animal breeding course (Herring, Thomas, and Enns, 2001), and an undergraduate plant science course (Tignor, Wilson, and Wilson, 2002).

Other course-related articles over this same time period have described courses that have focused on subjects and topics that are more generic in nature and could be taught within most, if not all, disciplines in colleges of agriculture. Examples have included a job-search skills course (Stephens, Brockman, and Davis, 1992), a capstone course (Wright, 1992; Zimmerman, 1997; Andreasen and Trede, 2000), and an orientation course (Zimmerman, 1999). This article will describe a Graduating Senior Survey course that fits into the generic category.

### Course Background

For every semester beginning fall 1997, the Department of Economics at Iowa State University has required graduating seniors majoring in Agricultural Business to take an R-credit Graduating Senior Survey course. The R-credit designation means that it is required for graduation while carrying zero semester credit for academic purposes. The four main goals of this course are 1) to assist students with graduation and career placement, 2) to collect outcomes assessment information, 3) to help prepare students for alumni life, and 4) to enhance student relations. The remainder of this article will discuss these course goals along with related procedures and observations.

With the exception of a resume assignment, students are able to complete all course-related assignments in class. Students who miss a class for any reason are required to complete all in-class assignments for that day outside of class. There are no required readings for the course. The course meets for an hour five times during the semester (one time each during the first week and the last four weeks of the semester). The daily class agendas have typically been as follows:

Class #1: Course introduction, overview, and objectives, including:

- Review graduation requirements
- Discuss the current job market outlook
- Explain alternative job search procedures
- Collect current plans after graduation information

Class #2: Students provide outcomes assessment information by completing various in-class, written surveys.

Class #3: Selected faculty members listen to student's oral comments about their educational experiences and to respond to students' questions or concerns.

Class #4: A certified financial planner discusses issues related to financial management and planning after graduation, including opportunities and expectations regarding alumni.

Class #5: Review college convocation and university graduation procedures, including

- Collect information on students' plans after graduation
- Collect resumes from students
- Administer any other desired written surveys
- Recognize graduating seniors individually and present each a gift
- Conclude with a reception

### **Assisting Students with Graduation and Career Placement**

One of the goals of the Graduating Senior Survey course is to assist students with last-semester plans for graduation and career placement. Most of the first class session is devoted to attaining this goal. Students are given a course administration hand out as is typically done on the first day of most classes. At this time it is important to explain course goals and their importance, maybe more so than usual, as many students come into the class not understanding fully why they are being required to take a class for which they receive no credit. Graduation requirements and important forthcoming graduation-related dates are reviewed. As students begin what is intended to be their last semester, many of them are somewhat nervous and apprehensive about graduating. They want to make double sure everything is in order and that they will indeed graduate. This first class session is a great way to put students' minds at ease and help them understand all final steps and procedures leading up to their graduation. In some cases, unmet graduation requirements have been caught early enough as a result of this class session to allow for remedial action so as not to delay the students' graduation.

Each student completes a Student Information Survey listing their current campus contact information, current job status, and career interest areas. This information is shared with academic advisors and the college career services office to facilitate the matching of job candidates with job openings as the semester proceeds. The college career services office director is invited to class to give a status report on the current job market and to explain policies and procedures for using that office in the job search process either as a current graduating senior or as an alumnus. Students are reminded of some potential sources of information and assistance on various aspects of the job search process including resume preparation and interviewing. This information has helped students understand more fully the process of seeking employment offers.

### **Collecting Outcomes Assessment Information**

A second goal of this course, and the main reason

it was created, is to gather outcomes assessment information from soon-to-be alumni. Miller et. al. (1998) correctly suggest that outcomes assessment is needed in higher education for accountability and program improvement purposes. Huba et. al. (2000) define assessment as gathering and discussing information from diverse sources in order to determine what students have learned from their educational experiences and what they can do with that knowledge. Surveys of alumni as well as surveys of employers have been popular methods used by many departments to provide feedback on the strengths and weaknesses of academic programs. Collecting this type of information from all graduating seniors in a formal course setting has been found to be easier and less time consuming than attempting to collect it utilizing mail surveys and/or exit interviews. In addition, this method of data collection helps achieve a response rate approaching 100 percent which is not likely with other methods.

Students are asked to complete a number of different surveys (available upon request) in class during the second-class session. These have included 1) a Program Evaluation Survey which consists largely of open-ended questions asking students to recommend program changes including course requirements for the major, to suggest changes in departmental advising-related services, and to identify the best courses they have taken inside and outside of the department; 2) a Senior Survey which asks students to indicate the extent to which they agree or disagree with approximately 30 different questions related to the program; 3) an Instructor Evaluation form which lists all of the instructors in the department and asks students to evaluate each instructor they have had for at least one course on a scale ranging from very poor to very good; 4) an Advisor Evaluation form which lists all of the advisors in the department and asks students to evaluate each advisor they have worked with in an advising capacity on a scale ranging from very poor to very good; 5) a Self Assessment form on which students are asked to evaluate their own ability to perform various tasks or to demonstrate selected skills which are regarded as desirable educational outcomes for graduates of our program; 6) an Economic Literacy Test which is a short multiple choice test over basic economic concepts and principles; and 7) an Employer/Employment Survey which asks students to rank various factors influencing their job choice decision and to rate selected business firms on specific job-related criteria.

Results from the Program Evaluation Survey and the Senior Survey have been shared with faculty in the department. The department has used results from these surveys as a sounding board for student reaction to the status quo as well as to possible changes. New questions have been added to the survey almost every semester for this reason.

Departmental curriculum committee members have been particularly interested in this information and have used it to make some student-recommended changes in requirements for the major. Examples of such changes have included offering new courses, increasing electives by reducing the number of required courses, and adding lab sections to existing courses. Some possible program changes have not been pursued as a result of student feedback from these surveys.

Summary results from the Senior Survey are also shared with students at the beginning of the third class session that is devoted entirely to having a faculty/student oral discussion about the program. Advisors and administrators in the department typically attend this session. Students are invited to comment on anything they liked or disliked related to their experiences as students in the program. This class session functions like one large exit interview with most graduating-senior students in attendance. The students are encouraged to do most of the talking and many have been more than willing to speak up on various issues. There have been some very spirited discussions.

Faculty members in attendance mainly listen and take notes which are summarized shortly after the meeting. Students quickly learn that not all of their peers agree with them on some issues. For example, students often learn that other students actually liked and learned a lot from a class that they felt differently about. This helps students to understand and appreciate some of the difficulties faced by the department in developing and administering the major, and that is quite impossible to satisfy all students all of the time. A potential problem with this class session is to have a few outspoken students dominate the discussion in order to voice their grievances. To ensure a balanced discussion containing a cross section of views and opinions, it is important to have a designated faculty member lead the discussion to get the more reserved students to speak out and to elicit positive comments so the class session does not deteriorate merely into a gripe session. In addition, during this session, faculty intentions and goals regarding the academic program can be clarified for the benefit of students.

Results from the Instructor Evaluation and the Advisor Evaluation forms are shared with the departmental chairperson. These results represent an additional source of information about the effectiveness of instructors and advisors in the department and have been used to make changes in the assignments and/or salary of individual staff members. These results are different from standard course/instructor evaluations in that they are completed by all students (not just those in attendance on course evaluation day). Graduating seniors should be in the best position to reflect on the relative effectiveness of instructors/advisors because they

have had the most experience working with these faculty members within the department. How these faculty evaluation results are to be summarized, distributed, and used are potentially sensitive issues that should be agreed to in advance by the faculty members in the department.

The Employer/Employment Survey results have been shared with the faculty, the college career services office director, and representatives of the selected business firms included in the survey. These results have identified factors that are important to students in evaluating job offers, sources used by students to obtain information about jobs, and student perceptions of different companies. This information is being used by recruiters to evaluate their campus image as well as their hiring practices and procedures. Sharing this kind of information with company representatives has helped to strengthen working relationships between industry and the university an additional benefit of offering this course.

During the last class period, students are asked to turn in an updated resume and complete a Plans After Graduation Survey. On this survey, students provide information about positions accepted, salary offers received, and levels of satisfaction with both. This data provides information on the ability of graduates to obtain meaningful employment, which is often looked at as an important assessment measure of program effectiveness. This information is summarized and also used in recruiting new students. This information would be much more difficult to collect if the department attempted to collect it through alumni surveys. Students who have not yet taken positions by the last class period are given stamped, self-addressed post cards and asked to return them to the department after they do take a job. The updated resumes are filed in each student's advising folder and is an excellent summary of a student's accomplishments while in school and may be used for reference purposes later.

### **Preparing Students for Alumni Life**

A third objective of the course is to assist students in preparing for life as alumni. The fourth class session is dedicated to this goal. A representative of the university's alumni office explains procedures, costs, benefits of becoming an official member of the university's alumni association. About ten minutes have been allotted to this presentation. The rest of this class is spent discussing all aspects of financial planning and management after graduation with a certified financial planner. Savings and retirement plans, paying off loans, buying versus renting houses, buying versus leasing cars, and managing credit cards are typical financial topics discussed. Students will hopefully be better able to deal with personal financial matters after college as a result of this free financial counseling class session. Numerous,

unsolicited student comments indicate that they often appreciate the free financial advice.

### Enhancing Student Relations

A fourth objective of the course is to improve student relations and to generate feelings of good will on behalf of the students toward the department. Alumni are more likely to be supportive of their former department if they left feeling good about their program of study. Satisfied alumni are more likely to be supportive alumni who will help recruit future students, come back to campus to talk to classes and clubs, offer jobs to current students, and financially support departmental programs. Giving students ample opportunities to provide feedback in both written and oral forms as described above is intended to let students know that the department cares about them and values their opinions. During the last class period, students are also treated to a reception, introduced individually, and given a small graduation gift from the department (e.g. a departmental coffee mug, pen, letter opener, calculator, etc.). A representative of the department also addresses the group, thanks them for having been a student in the department, gives them a few words of advice, wishes them well, and encourages them to keep in touch.

### Conclusions

While organized mainly for the purpose of teaching discipline-specific subject matters, there are a number of other related important tasks that academic departments can, and probably should, do with and for their students as they near graduation during their last semester on campus. For example, departments can 1) help students graduate and find employment; 2) collect outcomes assessment information from graduating seniors; 3) assist students in preparing for life after college; and 4) enhance relations with current students and by so doing, hopefully, enhance alumni relations. How to accomplish these tasks often is a monumental administrative challenge and viewed by many as a time-consuming, logistical, paperwork nightmare. A Graduating Senior Survey course offers a mechanism by which these tasks can be performed in an organized manner with a minimal investment of faculty time and cost.

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