Closing the Loop Grant Assessment Report
“Creating Collaborative Core Courses: A case study of MSFS 510: International Relations Theory & Practice”
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Summary of Pilot Program

MSFS 510 is a required survey course on the theory and practice of international relations (IR). Until the Fall 2011 session, it has been taught in separate sections by five professors. The sections are streamed based on extent of background in IR coursework and vary from a group of very knowledgeable students who majored in IR as undergraduates, to a section of students who have taken no courses in IR or related social science disciplines. Previous to this year, the instructors designed their own syllabi and established their own grading criteria. The grant allowed the MSFS program to pilot a restructuring of the class, as well as generate a model of planning and curricular frameworks for program level co-teaching to be considered for other core courses and beyond.

Over the grant period, the group of five MSFS instructors designed a standardized curriculum with one syllabus, held joint lectures every class rotating the instructor dependent on expertise, then broke into discussion sections led by section instructors. During the planning and execution of the class, the instructors engaged in extensive coordination across instructors and regularly checked in with MSFS program administrators for their views. After the semester ended, the instructors met to reflect on the experience and emailed exchanges across the instructors, canvassed students as to their views about the course, reviewed course evaluations, and one of the Team Leaders met with the MSFS program administrators for a debriefing.

Evaluation of Pilot

Instructors’ Evaluations

The instructors extensively discussed their perceptions of the pedagogical strengths and weaknesses of the new course design. Below is a summary of the pros and cons from their perspective.

Pros

• The entire entering MSFS class received a coherent, comprehensive and standardized introduction to the study and practice of international relations.
• The lectures were delivered by instructors best suited to the topic at hand. For example, Dr. Victor Cha, an expert on Asia, gave a lecture on the “Rise of China,” and Dr. Erik Voeten, a noted international law and organization scholar, spoke on “Sovereignty and Human Rights.”
• The learning assessments (take home mid-term, paper, and participation) were jointly created and applied to ensure that evaluations were fairly and equitably done across all sections. Each instructor used the official MSFS grading distribution to differentiate appropriately the performance of each student. This standardized criteria for evaluation and grading distribution is critical to making sure second-year fellowships can be awarded on the basis of grades in the core courses.

• The instructors are now much more aware of the teaching content and methods of the sections. We observed each other teaching the course material in the lectures and were able to develop a sense of best practices in teaching, learning, and evaluation.

Cons

• In the view of all instructors, the new format of MSFS 510 limited the ability to forge a close teaching relationship with students in their section. There are two elements to this:

1) Traditionally, MSFS 510 has an ‘arc’ to the semester, a narrative that each instructor conceptualizes and executes in terms of his own analytical understanding of the theory and practice of international politics. Having each week taught from a different perspective proved difficult to maintain a sustained intellectual link with the students. Instructors also found it hard to structure the discussion sections when the lecture content was not under the seminar leader’s control.

2) Reducing the amount of contact time from the usual full seminar meetings to half of that (in order to accommodate for the weekly, large lectures when all seminar classes were together) made some of instructors feel less connected to the students. There was not ample time in the shortened seminar sections to develop the usual one-on-one relationships that the instructors prize and that form the foundation for mentorship through the MSFS years and beyond.

• Finally, student course evaluations were lower than in the course redesign semester than with the previous seminar-only semesters. Two variables also can be associated with the decline in course evaluations: less time for relationship building between student and instructor and the change to online evaluations, which both reduced participation rate. It was also noted that the shift to online evaluations, from in-class to at-will, makes previous semesters’ ratings incomparable to those of the redesign semester’s ratings in fall 2011.

Students

The MSFS 510 students’ course evaluations from the fall 2011 class were likewise mixed. It should be noted that this required course is challenging because it demands that
students develop rigorous analytical abilities grounded in major theories of IR, and also, then apply those critical analyses to real world situations. The course helps set the foundation for the MSFS degree. The curricular scope of degree integrates analytical skills dealing with underlying theoretical, cause-and-effect assumptions as well as more technical and empirically-oriented knowledge.

There were noticeable differences in the outcomes, both qualitative and quantitative, of the course. The outcomes cannot be solely linked to the new online format of the evaluations as there were several uncontrolled variables, not to mention a systemic change to the course structure, assessments, and pedagogy. The formalized course evaluation feedback provided by MSFS 510 students was taken into consideration collectively with anecdotal student feedback, instructors’ feedback, and MSFS administrators’ feedback alike all have contributed to some changes with MSFS 510 course curriculum in the subsequent semesters.

**Conclusion**

As a result of the MSFS 510 pilot, it was decided that the course will move back to a mostly seminar based format, but will build on the experiences of the pilot. Thus, MSFS 510 instructors will be holding several joint lectures together during the semester on topics where the expertise of the speaker is unique, such as having Professor Colin Kahl discuss US policy in Iraq and Afghanistan. The instructors will also continue to use the MSFS grading distribution and actively work to ensure that learning assessments and evaluations are standardized as much as possible across the sections. In addition, being part of a pilot learning community produced important results that will extend into future teaching. All the joint format instructors felt that they gained new ideas about teaching, such as the use of a course blog for students to comment on the readings before class, as well as more generally learning about the substantive material that each scholar brought to MSFS 510 in his lectures. Finally, the instructors decided to pursue the idea of allowing students to place out of MSFS 510, and we are going forward with developing an exam to this purpose. It is likely that roughly 20 percent of the incoming class may place out, in line with procedures in the MSFS Economics classes.

In sum, the pilot demonstrated the nuances that need to be understood and taken into account when attempting a wholesale redesign of a course with well established instructional traditions. The various aspects outlined in the pros and cons sections should help MSFS curricular administrators better strategize about how to achieve the goals of a standardized education that is also tightly linked to the visions and pedagogical relationships of the various instructors to their students.