

Meeting Employers' Needs Through Project Management Education



Project management at Syracuse University is an integral part of several undergraduate and graduate degree courses. The project management curriculum sits within the interdisciplinary School of Information Studies (known as the iSchool). The iSchool faculty has built close working relationships with national employers. Graduate outcomes are impressive: the iSchool has the highest placement rate for graduates across campus and 97 percent of Information Management graduate students receive offers of employment.

This has been made possible by aligning courses with the needs of employers, providing practical experiential learning opportunities for students and maintaining rigorous academic standards. The project management courses are a key part of this effort.

DEVELOPING A CURRICULUM THAT LEADS TO EMPLOYMENT

“When I began teaching Project Management in 2001, I felt that the original course syllabus I was given was not as rigorous as it should have been,” says Dr. Art Thomas, Associate Professor of Practice, School of Information Studies and Faculty Lead for the project management curriculum at the iSchool. As he restructured that course, the project management profession was becoming more formal. A curriculum committee was formed at the School with the objective of creating a standardized introductory class. The new foundation course was launched in 2006, and, along with an advanced course, it brought the curriculum more in line with employer expectations. A few years later the School enrolled in the PMI’s Registered Education Provider (R.E.P.®) Program. “The introductory course was approved under the R.E.P Program,” says Dr. Thomas, “and from that point on we became tightly aligned with PMI.”

Dr. Thomas was aware that securing a job was a priority for many students but in order to be prepared for the workforce they had to go even further. “There were other aspects to project management that weren’t even dealt with in the original two-course sequence,” Dr. Thomas says. He recognized that the university required a structured sequence of classes taking undergraduates and graduates through basic to advanced project management skills. “We put on several additional classes including stakeholder management, an IT consulting class and a class on project complexity.”

WORKING WITH INDUSTRY PARTNERS

The focus on strong graduate outcomes has not gone unnoticed by local employers. Deloitte LLP approached Dr. Thomas and asked what the organization could do to help support and enhance the iSchool project management curriculum. Managers worked with the faculty over a two-year period, which included setting the objectives for and developing an IT Enterprise Consultation course. The course focuses on working in a formalized team within a structured consulting environment with a strong client relationship bias. As around 30 percent of course alumni go into some form of consulting, it was important to align the academic curriculum to what employers look for in a new employee.

The university has also worked to build strong links with other industry partners and employers. "JPMorgan Chase is a prominent employer," says Dr. Thomas. "Our formal collaboration with them has meant that they are involved in a variety of ways. We reformed the curriculum to cover large-scale projects and embedded global and virtual team management concepts in our classes. We used real-life examples from JPMorgan Chase for all of these."

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING PROVIDES PRACTICAL SKILLS

The undergraduate capstone course provides practical experience in the form of live projects. It aims to provide students with the opportunity to use their knowledge and the tools they have learned. Students work in local not-for-profit organizations delivering real-life projects, supported by an instructor. This practical work experience is useful, but Dr. Thomas realized that it was not the only way to expose students to the world of work, particularly international students

"International students were at a loss because most have had little or no work experience in the US and their language skills were such that many needed more practice in workplace English," Dr. Thomas explains. "We brought in our local PMI Chapter to expand iConsult, our experiential learning environment that allows students to get real-world opportunities to explore their knowledge."

Teams of four to five student volunteers take on projects for not-for-profit, government and veteran organizations, providing solutions that include website, database, data management and systems initiatives. They are assigned a volunteer PMI Chapter member to mentor the team. "It helps them understand what it is to be a project manager and in a team," says Dr. Thomas. "They learn about standard templates, what documents look like and what it really means to be a professional project manager. The PMI Chapter mentors can take students aside if they feel the student isn't demonstrating professional standards."

Currently 75 students are involved in this updated version of the iConsult program, which is available to all students. "The experience they gain helps ensure their résumé contains something meaningful," says Dr. Thomas. "This helps the graduates in interviews and makes them more saleable." Students also report feeling more confident in workplace situations.

Feedback from employers has been extremely positive. "We are consistently improving the number of students being hired," says Dr. Thomas. "Employers tell us that when they put one of our graduates on a project team they stand out from their colleagues. Hiring managers keep coming back to us and telling us that they had no idea they could get graduates of this caliber."

Project management has become a core skill as a result of demand from employers."

~ Art Thomas, Ed. M., Ph.D. Associate Professor of Practice, School of Information Studies, Syracuse University

REVISING YOUR PROJECT MANAGEMENT CURRICULUM

In a field like project management which is constantly evolving, curriculum development is ongoing. "Never take a course for granted," says Dr. Thomas. "It has to be something that continually works." He has some tips for universities looking to revise and refresh their project management curricula.

Look at what the course could be. "Don't accept the course as it is," Dr. Thomas says. "You have to constantly say, 'What could this be?'" Draw on faculty, industry partners and PMI to constantly evolve your curriculum.

Stay up-to-date. The Syracuse University iSchool project management curriculum was amended to include a stronger focus on stakeholder management, partly in response to A Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK® Guide) – Fifth Edition, including a section on this topic. The PM faculty has also introduced Agile into the foundation level courses.

Work with business. Involve local employers in curriculum development. "Employers and corporate partners have given us case studies to show how tools are being used in the real world," says Dr. Thomas. Industry partners can also be a source of guest lecturers and valuable work experience for students.

WORKING TOGETHER WITH PMI

"Once we became involved with the Syracuse PMI Chapter the relationship between PMI and the university tightened and it has become highly valuable," says Dr. Thomas. The university offers PMI-taught certification classes for the Certified Associate in Project Management (CAPM)® which are aligned to the foundation course so students do not need to repeat the same curriculum elements again. "Students take the foundation class and then there is a seven-week workshop study period conducted by PMPs from the Chapter to assist students getting their CAPM® credential," Dr. Thomas explains.

The shorter course, which students helped design, makes the process of achieving CAPM® status less expensive and provides students with a support network for studying for the exam. The workshop runs every semester with 15-20 students. "It has raised the profile of the CAPM® credential amongst employers too," says Dr. Thomas. "They snap up students with CAPM®."

"The PMI Chapter and the university working together maximize the knowledge available to us and help students participate in real-world experiences," says Dr. Thomas. "We are doing things at the university that would not be possible without the dedication of the PMI Syracuse Chapter."

Visit PMITeach.org for more information about how your university can partner with PMI.

SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY ISCHOOL PROJECT MANAGEMENT CURRICULUM AT A GLANCE

- Location: Syracuse, New York, USA
- Number of undergraduate students: 628
- Number of graduate students: 593
- Graduate employment: 97% with the highest average starting salary as compared to other programs across campus
- Delivery methods: On campus, online

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