

# MARKET-BASED CURRICULUM REVISION: A SUGGESTED PROCESS FOR CURRICULUM MAINTENANCE

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## ABSTRACT

*Recently, many critics of business schools have observed that business curricula seem to be losing their relevance and connection to the practice of business. Whether one accepts this critique or not, there appears to be universal support for the notion that business curricula should be dynamic and should go beyond the teaching of fundamentals. While there is a good deal of published work on the outcome of curriculum revision processes, there is far less written discussion of the process itself. This paper addresses this gap in the literature by proposing a process for continuously maintaining the relevancy of a business curriculum, and by offering examples of how this process has been used successfully to create new courses and to revise existing courses.*

## INTRODUCTION

This paper focuses on curriculum revisions and new course development. It presents a tested method for revising existing courses and developing new courses. Curricular changes are thought to be important for at least three reasons. First, curricular revisions can help further an institution's mission. The work of Lee (2006) provides an example of curriculum change that was designed to better align the academic offerings of an institution with its mission statement. Lee's example featured a university whose mission was to serve the needs of its surrounding community and the process by which the institution assessed and made curricular changes to appropriately reflect those needs. Second, there is the always important issue of relevance. Hubbard (2008) and Navarro (2008), whose work was based on a survey of 50 of the top business schools in the country, strongly suggest that business schools' curricula must undergo a somewhat dramatic change in orientation and objectives if these schools are to remain relevant. The unpredictable and dynamic nature of the current business environment demands that business education go beyond teaching fundamental skills to developing the ability to identify and appropriately react to opportunities. The pace of change results in a shifting definition of "fundamental skills" that in and of itself suggests the need for periodic reviews of curriculum. Because business school graduates will work in a complex, multidimensional world, the business school curriculum must be both multidisciplinary and integrative rather than focused on functional silos (Navarro 2008).

Lastly, curriculum revision can add a dimension to the intellectual growth of faculty as it often requires faculty members to change the content and/or delivery of their courses. The creation of new courses especially

requires faculty to think in new ways about effective course delivery and so further encourages, supports and reinforces faculty members' efforts to remain intellectually active and engaged.

Curriculum revision is, in the full sense of the word, a continuous process. The continuity of the process results in a steady stream of micro changes to course content initiated and implemented from term-to-term by individual faculty members with the objective of maintaining the relevance of that content. Within academic periods, more timely and relevant materials are added to replace existing course contents: examples of concepts are added or deleted; texts, readings, and assignments are changed; presentation technologies are refined and new presentation technologies are introduced. Marketing is a dynamic discipline and its course content must reflect that dynamism. Professors want to be good teachers (Kemp and O'Keefe 2003) and being good means, among other things, being current. Revisions are especially necessary in a discipline where contemporary events and actions of business institutions can be incorporated to illustrate time-honored general principles.

To outside observers the continual process of curricular revision may not be immediately recognizable. On the surface, the curriculum, as a series of course numbers and titles presented in bulletins or online, may appear to be unchanged from year to year. Introductory Marketing, for example, is one among a series of required courses listed from year to year and decade to decade. But inside observers know that the content and the direction of this staple course is continually being revised. The activities involved in these micro revisions may eventually attain a critical mass directed toward more extensive and even holistic program level revisions which will involve the deletion of existing courses and the creation of new ones.

The continuous nature of curriculum revision may begin with the small, unseen changes to existing courses, but these changes can grow into more substantive and visible changes. As such, the continuous nature of curriculum revision encompasses the following types of curricular changes:

1. The revision of topical areas and presentation technologies within existing courses within existing programs.
2. The deletion of existing courses or programs.
3. The combining of content within existing courses or programs.
4. The addition of new courses or program.

The existing literature on curriculum revision tends to present examples of discontinuous curriculum revisions (i.e., revisions that result in large, drastic changes) rather than the continuous changes that must occur over time in order for a curriculum to maintain its currency to the field and its relevancy to the practice. The present manuscript will present a process by which these continuous changes can be managed and integrated into a business school's existing curriculum.

### **CURRICULUM REVISION LITERATURE REVIEW**

The literature on curriculum revision is extensive and typically separately addresses business curricula at the graduate and undergraduate level. More specifically, published articles tend to address either extensive revisions of MBA core curriculum or revisions to undergraduate curricula (both the general business core and electives within major fields). The stimulus for these revisions sometimes is provided by external sources (such as advisory boards or committees) or firms with which the program has a long-term relationship. Internal sources especially the observations of faculty member(s) are of primary importance. Proposing, integrating and implementing curricular revisions are essentially faculty activities.

With regard to the MBA curriculum, the literature offers many examples of business schools that have revised the core curriculum to be more integrative, flexible, and responsive to both students and potential employers (Alsop 2006; Bisoux 2005; Dumas et al. 2000; Hubbard 2008; Lathan et al. 2004; Shield and Coughlan 2007). Similarly, the literature on undergraduate curriculum revision offers examples of schools that have redesigned their core requirements and elective courses to accomplish the objectives of integration and relevance mentioned above (Billington and Watkins 1999; Carpenter and Agrawal 2008). However, accounts of undergraduate curriculum revision tend to focus more on specific functional areas than do the more program-oriented revisions reported in the literature on revisions to the graduate (MBA) curriculum (Entwhistle 2003; Dodd et al. 2002; Lee 2006).

### **Typical Curriculum Revision Process**

Regardless of the focus on MBA or undergraduate curriculum, the literature suggests that business schools tend to follow a similar process for making curriculum revisions:

1. Recognize need for curriculum revision.
2. Identify a course leader.
3. Form a committee.
4. Deliberate.
5. Institute the agreed upon extensions, revisions or deletions of courses within the curriculum.

This process seems robust and it has been used across a wide range of universities. The literature offers examples of the typical curriculum revision process leading to significant curriculum revisions. For example, the process was used at Columbia Business School to revise the core of the MBA program so that it would have fewer courses and greater flexibility (Hubbard 2008). The process has also resulted in more innovative curricular changes (e.g., the University of Kentucky's Gatton School of Business One-Year MBA program). The typical curriculum revision process suffers from at least two shortcomings:

1. It does not stipulate a method for testing proposed revisions prior to their becoming institutionalized.
2. It does not stipulate a method for evaluating the effectiveness of the proposed curriculum revision derived from information bearing on the validity of the objectives which initiated the revision.

The following section of this paper reports on a more empirical and more effective method for dealing with the uncertainties of the conventional approach to curriculum revision.

### **Market-Based Curriculum Revision (MBCR) Process**

The MBCR Process is a means of achieving continuous improvements to an existing curriculum, meeting the stated objectives of that curriculum and maintaining both relevance and responsiveness to current market needs. The MBCR process is modeled after the new product development process and thus gives business schools a chance to practice the very concepts that are taught to business students (Bush et.al. 1998). The process is presented in Figure 1 and more fully discussed below. As policy, the structured format of the MCBR process has proven to be superior to the typical curriculum revision process in at least two respects:

1. The process stimulates continuous curriculum development and revision; and
2. The process stipulates a procedure for testing and evaluating the results of curriculum revision.

**EXHIBIT 1**  
**COLLEGE EXPERIMENTAL COURSE (398/798) POLICY**

**Overview**

The 398/798 designation was proposed and adopted by the college administration as a means of stimulating and recognizing creativity and innovation in curriculum design. The 398/798 series provides opportunities for pilot testing of the content and methods of new courses that have been proposed and accepted by departmental faculty and forecasting potential demand for these courses.

The objectives of the 398/798 series are listed as follows:

1. Stimulate creativity in curriculum course design.
2. Stimulate innovative course development.
3. Stimulate scholarship via development of specialized courses.
4. Provide an opportunity for pilot testing and continuous improvement of course content and methodology.
5. Provide a “test market” setting to aid in forecasting future demand.

**Process**

The transition from a proposed offering to a recognized undergraduate or graduate departmental course proceeds as follows:

1. A new course (798/398) is proposed by one or more faculty members.
2. A course syllabus is prepared and reviewed by the departmental chairperson and curriculum committee. The course syllabus must incorporate a description of teaching materials; specific teaching and learning (assessment) objectives and grading procedures.
3. The department curriculum committee may approve the proposal or request clarifications or revisions to the proposal.
4. Upon approval, a course description is prepared and forwarded to the director of the undergraduate (398) or graduate (798) program for inclusion in coming announcements and schedules.
5. A scheduled time slot is agreed upon.
6. The course is promoted by the department and the college as an elective in the quarterly course schedule using its full title, for example, Marketing 398: Tools for Marketers.
7. The course is offered for a second time as a 398/798 elective.
8. Evidence is collected and documentation regarding the viability of the proposed course is prepared for presentation to the appropriate college graduate or undergraduate curriculum committee.
9. Upon the approval of the college committee the department’s chairperson will number the course appropriately, assure that a complete course description is incorporated into the college bulletin and web site and decide on the number of sections to be offered and the schedule of these offerings.

DePaul University’s College of Commerce instituted its MBRC policy as a method for overcoming the limitations experienced with college committee-based or completely departmentally- based curriculum revision processes. The process exists for both undergraduate and graduate courses and is centered on offering “special topics” courses (denoted by the course number 398 at the undergraduate level and 798 at the graduate level). The 398/798 policy has proven to be a successful way to manage course development and curriculum revision. It has been used to develop new courses which were added to the curriculum as part of the general business core, part of core requirements within a major, and as elective courses. The policy has also successfully prevented some

courses that were shown to be unviable from being permanently added to the curriculum.

The MBCR process was adopted to balance the need for the inclusion of new and/or updated content, which is most appropriately initiated at the department level, with the need to mesh this content with student enrollment patterns, university systems and other forces which are not usually considered in content-driven course revisions or additions. As is true of any innovation, curricular innovation which takes the form of new elective courses must be based upon a realistic assessment of available human and technological resources and on a measure of market demand. This means that decisions regarding the addition of new courses must consider not only the inno-

vative content of the proposed course, but the demand for that content on the part of a “critical mass” of existing or new students.

Aside from conducting some more or less rigorous survey analyses of student interest, a departmental chair can estimate potential demand by recourse to some time-honored surrogate indicators. For example, should the topic be recognized by members of the discipline(s) or profession(s) as being truly innovative but one not given appropriate coverage within the existing courses, or should a faculty member proposing the course have a reputation for scholarship and excellence in teaching recognized by peers and by the student body, the “critical mass” of enrollments necessary to assure one or several offerings of the course can be fairly safely assumed.

A permanent addition to course listings based on such assumptions, however, seems a premature decision. A method is needed for pilot testing these new course proposals as a means of assuring that they meet the criteria for inclusion as permanent required or elective course offerings. The MBCR process does exactly that. The process encourages new courses to be freely proposed and initially offered by departments, but it prevents those offerings from being immediately included as permanently added as electives. The MBCR process creates a bridge between individual course revisions and additions and more extensive curriculum revisions and promotes experimentation with course and program content.

The MBCR process involves the following steps which are more fully discussed in the sections that follow:

1. Evaluation of Existing Curriculum.
2. Course Experimentation.
3. Course Evaluation.
4. Curriculum Revision.

### **Evaluation of Existing Curriculum**

The first step of the MBCR involves the continuous evaluation of existing curriculum. This activity is in keeping with faculty members’ efforts to keep their courses relevant and current. Faculty members are expected to maintain contact with the theoretical and practical developments in their disciplines and to keep abreast of changes that may impact the pedagogy of their courses. In most cases, these activities result in incremental changes to the content and/or delivery of existing courses. In some cases a faculty member may propose that a topic, pedagogy, or course format should be the focus of a separate course rather than integrated into an existing course. This is the point at which the MBCR process proceeds to the next step: Course Experimentation.

### **Course Experimentation**

Faculty members are adept at thinking about the content of particular courses and proposing new courses

based upon contemporary content, new pedagogies, or new formats, but these new elective courses should not automatically be incorporated into an existing curriculum. The innovation literature suggests that proposed new offerings should go through a careful screening process that includes a first assessment of potential viability. The course testing stage of the MBRC requires a second carefully considered screening. In the course testing stage the department proposing the new course offers it as a special topics course and designates it as a 398 (undergraduate) or 798 (graduate) levels. The faculty member(s) proposing the course and teaching the course are charged to collect evidence in the form of his or her observations and student feedback and to make appropriate adjustments to the content and format of the course. This stage of the MBCR process serves the same purpose as the concept testing and test marketing stages of a new product development process.

While in the experimentation stage, the course under development must be offered at least twice but may be offered several times to allow the instructor more time to make and to assess further revisions. The requirement that new course be offered at least twice as 398/798 was instituted to provide departmental and college curriculum committees with empirical evidence to aid them in coming to decisions to approve or disapprove adding these courses as permanent electives. One may argue that the two-offering criterion is excessive and unnecessary because the two offerings may not be representative or not provide enough evidence on which to base a final decision. If the department chairperson and curriculum committee members believe that more evidence is required to validate their opinions of the viability, they are free to schedule more sections and so accumulate a greater range of observations. If two offerings are excessive, the evidence accumulated over the two offerings should empirically validate that point of view.

### **Course Evaluation**

The course evaluation stage of the MBCR provides an opportunity for the department and/or faculty to demonstrate that the course under development is viable and should be inserted into the curriculum as either a required or elective course. This stage is designed to ensure that the curriculum remains vibrant and current and that the pace of change is appropriately aggressive and consistent with goals, demands, and capabilities of the university and student body. It should be noted that viability is harder to demonstrate for proposed courses that are to be electives than for proposed additions to the core. Core courses have more stable and predictable enrollments, are likely to cover more traditional topics and so more faculty are prepared to cooperate in the revision and eventually teach the new course. The Course Evaluation stage has several possible outcomes:

1. The course is presented for possible incorporation into the curriculum (i.e., the chairperson and the departmental faculty members believe that the accumulated evidence supports a decision to have the college committee approve its addition as a permanent addition to the department's course offerings. If that is the decision, then the sponsoring department must take the role of advocate for the transition of the 398/798 to a permanent course offering.

While the contribution of a proposed course may be obvious to the departmental faculty and chairperson and to practitioners within the discipline, it may not be obvious to college curriculum committee members outside the discipline. The department, therefore, must submit evidence of the viability of the course as a permanent addition to the undergraduate or to the graduate curriculum committee. The departmental chair as the representative of the sponsoring department should be prepared to submit evidence regarding the following:

- ◆ Data derived from the two or more offerings that illustrate the level of student interest, for example, enrollment data, course evaluations data and assessment outcomes.
- ◆ Evidence of peer review by faculty members and representatives of the department's advisory board.
- ◆ An agreed upon projection of how frequently the course will be offered over the academic year.
- ◆ A statement of existing departmental resources which addresses the issues of a number of faculty members who have sufficient expertise to teach multiple sections of the new course.
- ◆ A statement regarding the fit of the new course with existing departmental offerings and a statement regarding how the course satisfies both departmental objectives and contributes to overall college objectives.
- ◆ As a result of examining the evidence accumulated the course may be dropped from further consideration as a course addition.
- ◆ Upon review of the evidence the chairperson and the departmental curriculum committee may decide that rather than being added as a new course, the proposed 798/398 should be used as a replacement for one or more current courses of related but somewhat obsolete content.
- ◆ The chair and the departmental committee members may decide that the 798/398 course could not stand alone but its more innovative features could be incorporated into the content of an existing course or courses.
- ◆ After examining the evidence accumulated and presented, the chair and the department faculty members may agree that the content of the proposed course is relevant but it would be wiser

to offer it periodically, for example, only once in an academic year or every other year. In that case, the course would maintain its 398/798 designation as a special interests course. In each of the situations described in 2 through 5, the departmental decision regarding the proposed revision would require no further approval and endorsement from the College curriculum committee.

## EVIDENCE OF MBCR'S EFFECTIVENESS

The MBCR process is designed to manage the process by which a curriculum maintains its currency and relevancy. This process should provide an outlet for faculty who try to marry the changes to their discipline with the constraints of their curriculum. As such, the MBCR process may be deemed effective to the extent that faculty experiment with courses and the extent to which new courses are evaluated for inclusion in the permanent course offerings. As with any successful new product process, one would expect to find instances of success and failure. In fact, since our College adopted and implemented MBCR policy originally proposed by the Department of Marketing, a significant number of new courses have been proposed and tested as outlined in the policy statement. As we pointed out above, some of these courses have been added to the permanent array of departmental course offerings, others failed to meet the burden of evidence criterion specified by the policy and still others have remained as Marketing 398/798 courses which are offered on some agreed upon schedule. Exhibit 2 provides additional information regarding some of the recent uses of the MBCR process.

The MBCR process is also designed to maintain a curriculum's relevancy. As such, student interest in the experimental and innovative elements within a curriculum is one measure of the effectiveness of the process. Exhibit 3 demonstrates that the MBCR process has resulted in curriculum changes that have been well-received by the student body. The data reveal that at the undergraduate level, overall enrollments have increased and new courses account for most of the increase. Further, at the graduate level, while overall enrollments are more inconsistent over time, the percentage of enrollment from new courses has more than tripled in the last decade.

## SUMMARY

Curriculum revision must be grounded in practicality. We consider the MBCR process to be an example of "pedagogical pull" as opposed to "pedagogical push." As we preparing this article for submission we noted that there are calls from within and outside of business schools suggesting that, given the current economic conditions, the schools must rethink and revise areas of their traditional

**EXHIBIT 2  
MBCR EXAMPLES**

**MKT 376: Effective Business Communication**

<b>Curriculum Evaluation</b>	<b>Course Testing</b>	<b>Course Evaluation</b>	<b>Outcome</b>
Faculty perceived current curriculum as deficient in teaching oral communication skills and applying those skills in business contexts.	Course was developed and offered in 5 academic terms as MKT 398.	Students demonstrated marked improvement in oral communication skills in course and in subsequent courses.	Course was added to list of permanent course offerings, and can be used to fulfill a general education requirement.

**MKT 315: Strategic Tools for Marketers**

<b>Curriculum Evaluation</b>	<b>Course Testing</b>	<b>Course Evaluation</b>	<b>Outcome</b>
Curriculum was deemed ineffective in teaching students analytical skills that can be used to inform decision-making.	Courses was developed and offered in 2 academic terms as MKT 398.	Course received satisfactory enrollments, student feedback, and instructor feedback.	Course was added as a required course for Marketing majors.

**MKT 543: Brand Culture**

<b>Curriculum Evaluation</b>	<b>Course Testing</b>	<b>Course Evaluation</b>	<b>Outcome</b>
Faculty expertise in the area of branding and brand cultures was not reflected in the curriculum.	Course was developed and offered over four academic terms.	Enrollment steadily increased each time the course was offered which indicated student acceptance and relevancy of course.	Course was added to graduate course offerings as a permanent elective.

**MKT 398: Category Management**

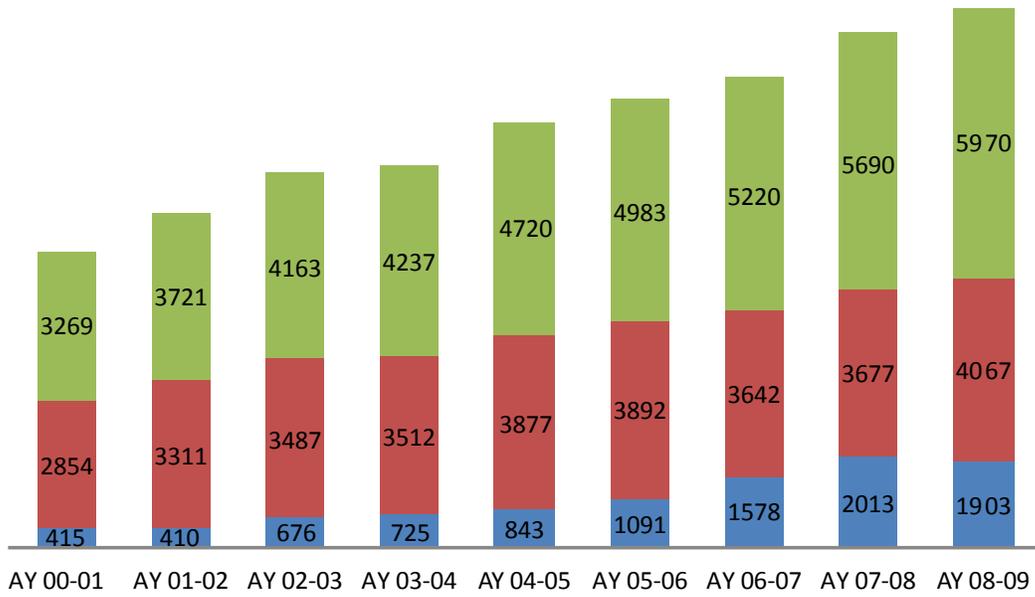
<b>Curriculum Evaluation</b>	<b>Course Testing</b>	<b>Course Evaluation</b>	<b>Outcome</b>
The importance of category management to sales professionals was not reflected in the current curriculum.	The course was developed and offered in the Fall of 2010.	Department is collecting feedback from faculty and students to determine effectiveness of course.	Course may become required class for students seeking a Sales Leadership concentration.

**MKT 398: Information Generation and Communication**

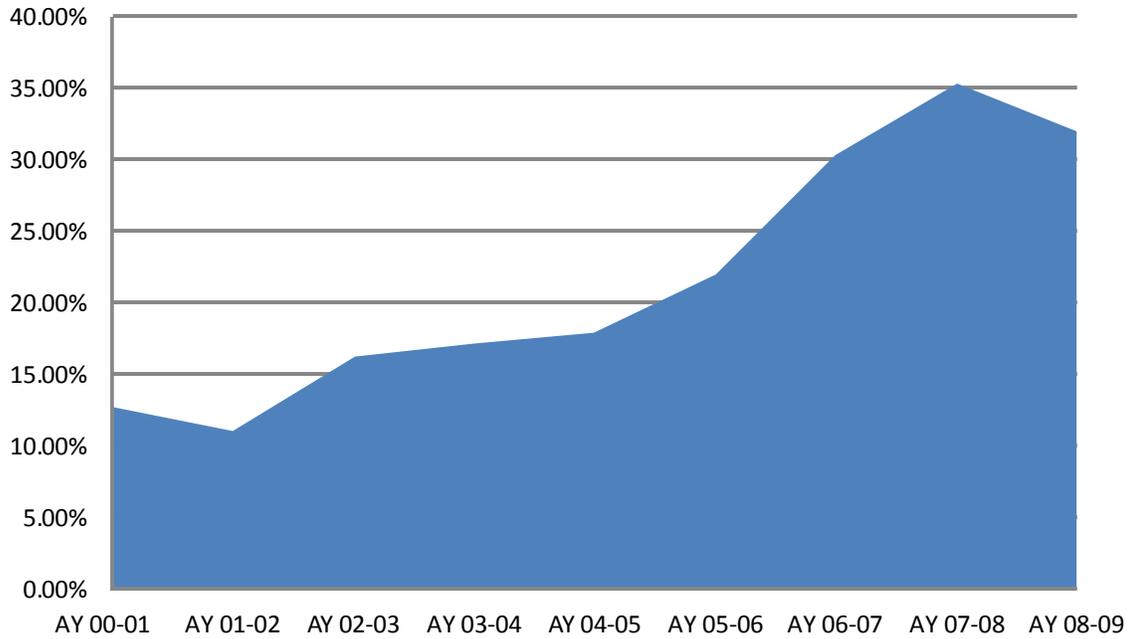
<b>Curriculum Evaluation</b>	<b>Course Testing</b>	<b>Course Evaluation</b>	<b>Outcome</b>
Current curriculum deemed deficient in teaching students to use statistical techniques and effectively communicate information derived from those techniques	Course was developed and offered twice.	Course was met with insufficient student demand and ceased to be offered. Course will be redesigned and offered again in upcoming academic term in response to feedback from department's advisory board.	It is planned that the redesigned course will be added as a permanent course and required of undergraduate Marketing majors.

**EXHIBIT 3  
THE IMPACT OF MBCR ON ENROLLMENTS**

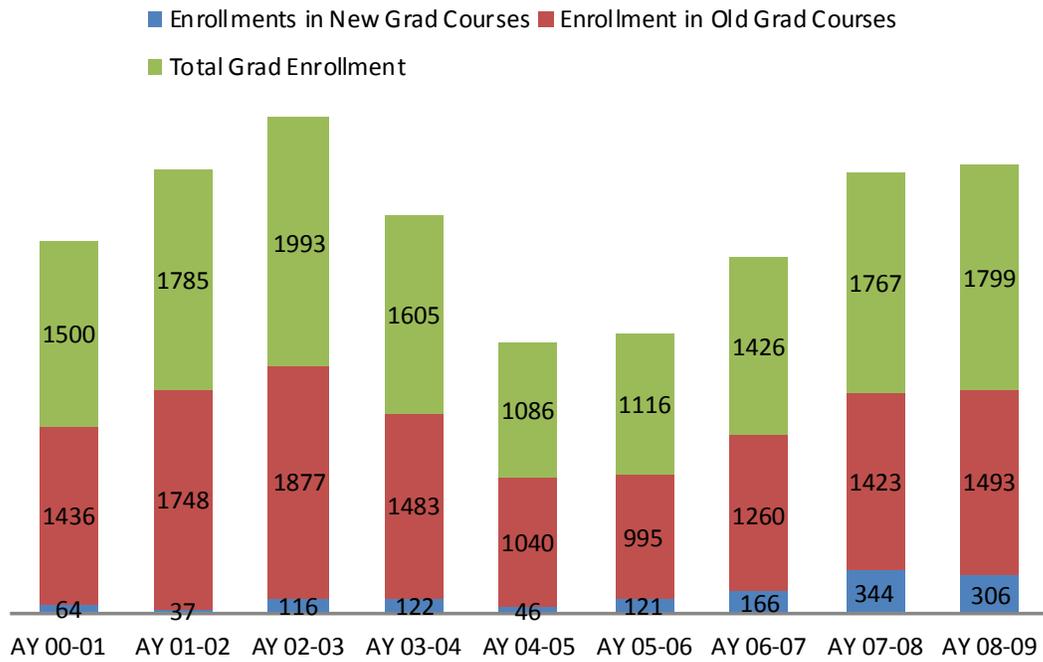
■ Enrollments in New UG Courses ■ Enrollment in Old UG Courses ■ Total UG Enrollment



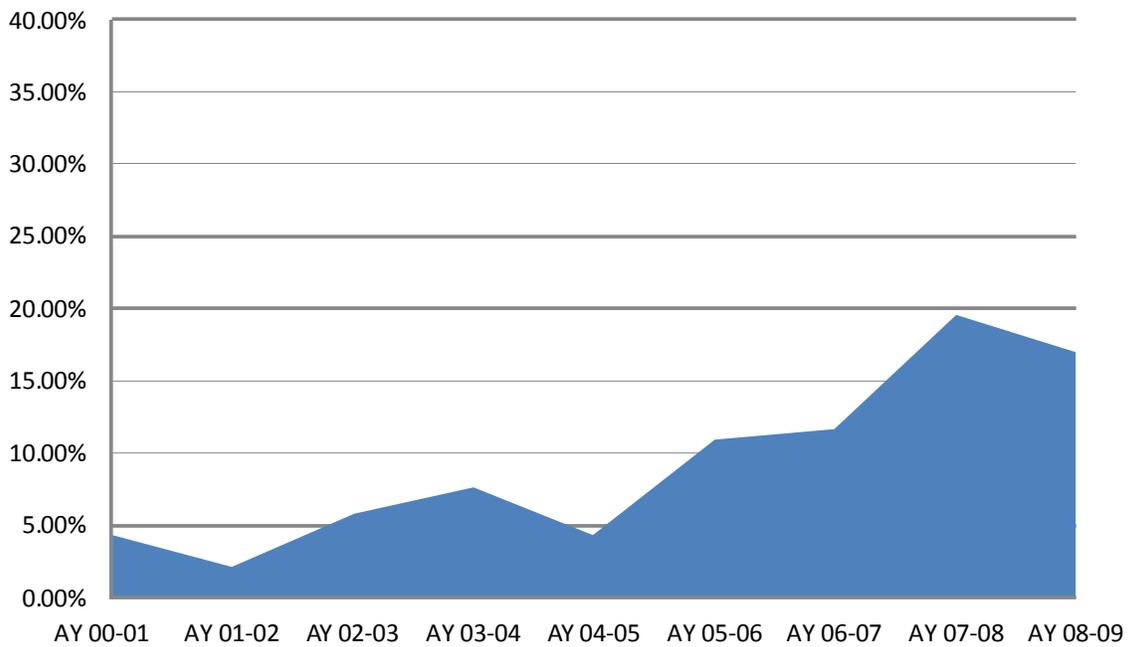
**New Course % Total UG Enrollment**



**EXHIBIT 3 (CONTINUED)  
TOTAL ANNUAL UNDERGRADUATE ENROLLMENT**



**New Course % Total Grad Enrollment**



curricula. An article in *The Week* (2009) summarizes some of the dialogue regarding these revisions. Curriculum revision requires creative and interested faculty members who can explicate their own observations and coordinate these with the observations, experiences and suggestions offered by advisory boards composed of marketing practitioners and turn these observations and suggestions

into effective actions. Our experience also leads us to conclude that effective curricula revisions require an administrative structure that is constituted to both advocate and oversee curriculum revision and a methodology (policy) for achieving revisions that will better serve the career aspiration of our graduates.

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