

# **Assurance of Learning Interventions: Adaptive Integration of Discussion Boards Across Program Curriculum**

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**Abstract.** This paper examines the integration of online discussion boards as an intervention to advance program learning goals and support Assurance of Learning in business education. Drawing from literature on signature assignments and online learning, features that make discussion boards effective tools for applied and reflective learning as well as assessment were explored. A case study discussion assignment from a graduate human resource management program was described to demonstrate how flexible signature discussion board assignments were implemented across multiple courses. Challenges highlighted include aspects of assignment design, faculty collaboration, and implications for academic quality. It was concluded that discussion boards can be adaptable and curriculum-aligned interventions for Assurance of Learning and continuous improvement.

**Keywords:** online discussion boards, signature assignments, assurance of learning, case studies, Human Resource Management.

## **1. Introduction**

Continuously improving the curriculum and optimizing student learning are common priorities in higher education, frequently driven by accreditation processes. These efforts, commonly referred to as Quality Assurance and Assurance of Learning, take different forms across institutions but share many features. These include setting and monitoring program learning goals, aligning course content with those goals and established standards, assessing student learning, and implementing interventions to enhance outcomes. These systems must now extend into online learning environments, where faculty development, instructional design, and strategic use of technology play an increasingly important role in improving academic quality (Maki, Shea, & Maki, 2021). In AACSB-accredited business schools, this formalized, faculty-driven Assurance of Learning process involves a number of steps culminating in a “closing of the loop” in which curriculum modifications are designed and implemented and

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program-level student learning toward program-level goals is assessed (e.g., see Lakhal & Sevigny, 2015; Mantai & Calma, 2022; Rexeisen & Garrison, 2013). These processes can support continuous improvement efforts by promoting assignments that not only assess but also advance student learning. When assignments are intentionally designed to align with program goals and challenge students at appropriate levels of rigor, they become useful tools for ensuring academic quality and delivering learning experiences with a lasting educational impact (Sullivan & McConnell, 2018).

This paper demonstrates how well-structured discussion board assignments can be developed and deployed to align with program learning goals, promote reflective and collaborative learning, and support systematic instructional improvement. To this end, the purpose of this paper is to illustrate a practice-based example of how an educational intervention can be implemented as part of the Assurance of Learning process in business education.

## **2. Assurance of Learning Interventions and Signature Assignments**

To address student learning needs in a graduate-level Human Resource Management (HRM) program, we developed an intervention based upon a combination of the practical needs of our graduate program and the spirit of signature assignments examined in the signature pedagogies literature. Signature assignments are a method for designing learning experiences that simultaneously support student achievement and provide evidence of academic quality (e.g., see Bowers, Mertz, Neiles, Chase, Koch, Larsen, Sherrer, & Townsend, 2025; Garfalo, Kelpsh, Phelps, & Kelpsh, 2016; Parsh, Merrifield, Migliaccio, & Munoz, 2021; Pinahs-Schultz & Beck, 2015; Quinlan & Pitt, 2021; Zhao, Zhou, & Dawson, 2021). The use of signature assignments as a pedagogical tool is consistent with the theoretical perspective of signature pedagogies, or the tendency for disciplines to feature teaching approaches that are particular to that field or profession, such as the use of clinical rounds in medical schools (Shulman, 2005). These course-embedded assignments serve as a method for assessing student achievement of learning goals while also providing a meaningful and engaging context for learning. A signature assignment functions as a milestone experience that provides authentic student learning and progress toward program learning objectives (Pinahs-Schultz & Beck, 2015).

Defining characteristics of signature assignments are that they align with program learning goals, engage students in applying and synthesizing learning, offer meaningful choice, and include a purposeful reflective component that helps students connect their learning to the curriculum, real-world contexts, and their individual perspectives (Roach & Alvey, 2021; Zhao et al., 2021). Although this can be true of a variety of course activities such as experiential learning assignments, our use of signature assignments for this paper is specifically