Managing Academic Transformation: Lessons from Redesigning a Graduate Project Management Curriculum [1]

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Abstract

Graduate project management programs face mounting pressure to remain relevant in a professional landscape reshaped by AI, evolving PMI standards, and the rapid convergence of traditional and agile delivery approaches. This paper documents a systematic redesign of a graduate-level Project Management Certificate Program within an executive education division of an AACSB-accredited research university, offering a replicable framework that academic directors and faculty leaders can apply in their own institutional contexts. The redesign unfolded in the midst of a GAC reaccreditation cycle and was a direct contributor to the program's successful six-year reaccreditation. The initiative was guided by four interconnected activities: gap analysis, industry benchmarking, stakeholder engagement, and phased course reconstruction. The result is a four-course core curriculum with an optional agile elective track, restructured around a deliberate two-semester logic, strategically aligned with the outcomes-based philosophy of the PMBOK® Guide, Eighth Edition—all before that edition was published. The paper argues that curriculum redesign in graduate management education is itself a project management endeavor, and that academic directors who remain actively embedded in professional practice bring a form of industry foresight that accelerates curriculum relevance. Practical lessons for academic directors, faculty governance participants, and institutional leaders are discussed.

Keywords: *curriculum redesign, project management education, PMBOK 8, outcomes-based learning, graduate program design, GAC reaccreditation, executive education, practitioner*

1. Introduction: Why Graduate PM Curricula Need Active Management

Graduate project management programs are, by nature, in a constant race with the profession they serve. The knowledge that defines best practice today is rarely the knowledge that defined it five years prior, and the gap between what academic programs teach and what industry currently requires has a well-documented tendency to widen when curriculum review is treated as periodic

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rather than continuous. For PM programs specifically, the pace of professional evolution has accelerated considerably: the shift from process-oriented to outcomes-based delivery, the integration of artificial intelligence into core PM workflows, and PMI's formal redefinition of what a project is have all occurred within a compressed timeframe that most academic governance cycles were not designed to absorb.

This paper documents a curriculum redesign initiative within the Executive Education Project Management Certificate Program at the Naveen Jindal School of Management (JSOM), University of Texas at Dallas. The redesign transformed a four-course sequence that had evolved organically into one that is deliberately structured, industry-responsive, and aligned with the emerging direction of PMI's standards ecosystem. Significantly, the redesign unfolded concurrently with the program's GAC reaccreditation process—a months-long undertaking that included an intensive two-day onsite review—and the revised curriculum was among the elements reviewed and approved as part of the program's successful six-year reaccreditation.

The account offered here is practitioner-informed. The academic director leading the redesign entered the role after about two decades of Fortune 500 IT consulting and independent project management practice, spanning technology, financial services, and healthcare sectors. That professional formation shaped the diagnostic instincts and industry foresight the redesign required. That context is relevant not as biography but as a structural variable other institutions should consider: programs led by academic directors who remain actively embedded in professional practice are better positioned to anticipate industry shifts than those relying solely on periodic advisory board cycles. The redesign documented here illustrates why.

The paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 establishes the diagnostic basis for change through gap and industry analysis. Section 3 documents the new curriculum architecture and its alignment with PMBOK 8. Section 4 covers implementation as a structured project, including governance and the GAC reaccreditation context. Section 5 addresses industry engagement mechanisms built into the program's operating model. Section 6 distills replicable lessons for academic directors and faculty leaders. The paper closes with a conclusion oriented toward the question every program should be asking: not what courses are offered, but what professional capability they reliably produce.

Curriculum redesign is not a housekeeping exercise. It is a strategic initiative—and it deserves the same disciplined management that project management programs teach their students to apply.

2. Diagnosing the Need for Change

Effective curriculum redesign begins with honest diagnosis. Before any course can be restructured or new content introduced, the academic director must answer three questions: Where are we now? Where does the market require us to be? What is the gap between those two positions? For the Executive Education PM Certificate Program at JSOM, the answers were both instructive and urgent.

2.1 The Existing Program: Understanding the Baseline

At the time the redesign process began, the Project Management Certificate Program consisted of four courses operating under the OPRE (Operations Research) course prefix. The prefix had been identified as a misalignment worth addressing—students pursuing a graduate credential in project management were enrolled in courses categorized as operations research—though changing the prefix itself required a separate, longer approval process. The immediate focus of the redesign was the course names, descriptions, and learning outcomes, which could be updated within an achievable governance timeline while still achieving the substantive changes the program needed.

The four existing courses—Project Initiation, Project Planning, Project Planning and Execution, and Project Execution and Closeout—had served their purpose well and provided students with a solid foundation in core PM practice. Like most programs of their era, however, they had been designed before the profession's current inflection point: before the PMBOK® Guide's philosophical pivot toward outcomes and value delivery, before AI tools became embedded in professional workflows, and before agile and hybrid delivery methods moved from niche to mainstream. The redesign was not a repudiation of what had been built. It was a recognition that the profession had moved and the curriculum needed to move with it.

A structured assessment surfaced several areas where the program had room to grow: coverage of agile and hybrid delivery methods was limited; hands-on tool-based learning was not yet fully integrated; and leadership and strategic delivery—increasingly prominent in PMI's own research and standards—were embedded within planning courses rather than treated as distinct competency areas. These were not structural failures. They were the natural consequence of a program that had been doing its job while the profession accelerated around it.

2.2 External Analysis: Market and Industry Dynamics

The external landscape reinforced both the opportunity and the urgency of redesign. PMI's talent gap research consistently projects significant global demand for credentialed project management professionals through 2030. Simultaneously, the nature of that demand is shifting: employers increasingly seek professionals who can operate across waterfall, agile, and hybrid delivery environments; who can articulate project value in strategic terms; and who bring both technical

PM competency and the leadership capabilities required to manage teams through complexity and change.

Competitive benchmarking against peer institutions revealed clear directional patterns. The strongest graduate PM programs were moving toward explicit agile and hybrid coverage, embedding real-world simulation experiences, and integrating professional-grade tools directly into coursework rather than treating them as elective enrichments. The most forward-looking programs were treating project leadership and stakeholder management as standalone competency areas rather than topics embedded within planning courses.

The external environment also surfaced the value of practitioner and academic community engagement as a real-time market intelligence mechanism. Participation in events such as PMI Global Conference—where practitioners, academic directors, and researchers share current challenges and emerging trends—provides a quality of forward-looking signal that formal benchmarking exercises, which necessarily document what programs are doing now, cannot fully replicate. For academic directors seeking to stay ahead of industry shifts rather than simply keeping pace with them, active conference engagement is a professional discipline, not a scheduling luxury.

The socio-political context also demanded attention. The COVID-19 pandemic had permanently reshaped distributed work, accelerated digital transformation timelines, and introduced new categories of project risk. Healthcare system redesign, public sector digitalization, and supply chain restructuring had elevated project management from a delivery discipline to a strategic organizational capacity. A curriculum that did not address these realities was not merely dated—it was misaligned with the environments graduates would actually inhabit.

2.3 The Practitioner Lens as Diagnostic Tool

One dimension of this diagnostic process deserves particular attention because it is not easily replicable through formal benchmarking alone. Academic directors who bring active industry experience to their roles carry a form of embedded market intelligence that standard advisory board input often lags. The ability to recognize, from direct professional experience, that the profession is moving toward outcomes-based delivery before that shift is codified in a published standard—and to act on that recognition in curriculum design—represents a structural advantage that institutions should seek to cultivate and protect.

This is not to suggest that practitioner experience substitutes for rigorous curriculum review. It is to identify it as a complementary input that accelerates the translation of industry direction into academic response. The redesign of the Executive Education PM Certificate Program at JSOM benefited from this advantage: course additions proposed in 2023 and approved in October 2024 were structurally aligned with the PMBOK® Guide, Eighth Edition's core philosophy when that edition was published in November 2025. Not because the edition was anticipated by name, but

because the professional direction it formalized was already visible to a practitioner embedded in the field.

3. The Redesigned Curriculum: Architecture and Rationale

The redesign was guided by a single organizing question: what does a graduate-level PM credential need to accomplish for a working professional in today's delivery environment, and does the current course sequence accomplish it? The answer shaped every subsequent decision about course structure, content, sequencing, and the strategic use of the approval process itself.

3.1 Working Within Governance: A Strategic Approach to Approvals

One of the more consequential decisions in the redesign was understanding exactly what required formal approval and what could be achieved within existing structures. Changing course names, descriptions, and learning outcomes—without changing course numbers or credit structures—could move through governance on a significantly compressed timeline. A full course replacement or addition, by contrast, triggers a longer institutional approval lifecycle. The redesign was structured to work within this reality: by renaming and substantially reconceiving the existing four courses, the curriculum was transformed without triggering the extended process that new course creation requires. New additions—Delivering Business Value with Projects and Project Leadership and Emerging Trends—were handled separately and received approval in October 2024.

The resulting curriculum structure reflects a deliberate two-semester logic. Semester One comprises two core mandatory courses that establish a rigorous grounding in foundational PM frameworks, methodologies, and tools. Semester Two offers three courses from which students choose two, allowing some degree of specialization based on professional focus or career stage. Students who wish to complete all three—or who want the full credential depth—are welcome to do so. An agile elective track was also approved, drawing on an existing course offered within another area of JSOM, giving students the option to extend their learning into agile-specific delivery frameworks without requiring entirely new course development.

3.2 The New Course Architecture

The table below documents the course-by-course transformation from the prior sequence to the redesigned curriculum:

Prior Course Name	Redesigned Name	Strategic Focus
OPRE 6372 – Project Initiation	Fundamentals of Project Management	Project selection, business case development, strategic alignment, stakeholder analysis
OPRE 6373 – Project Planning	Comprehensive Project Planning	Waterfall, Agile & hybrid methodologies; WBS; resource allocation; risk management
OPRE 6374 – Project Planning & Execution	Delivering Business Value Through Projects	Strategic PM, procurement, stakeholder engagement, cost management, quality assurance
OPRE 6375 – Project Execution & Closeout	Leadership & Emerging Trends in PM	AI in PM, sustainable practice, global delivery, organizational change, value delivery

The redesigned Semester Two courses address the gaps the market analysis had identified most consistently: explicit leadership treatment, strategic value delivery, and forward-looking coverage of emerging tools, AI applications, and agile frameworks. Each of the three Semester Two courses is substantive enough to stand alone as a professional development experience—which matters for a program serving working professionals who bring varying levels of prior PM experience to the credential.

3.3 Alignment with PMBOK 8th Edition

The PMBOK® Guide, Eighth Edition—released by PMI in November 2025—represents the most consequential shift in project management standards in a generation. Drawing on more than 48,000 data points and practitioner input from over 130 countries, the Eighth Edition restructures the standard around six core principles and seven performance domains, and redefines a project as "a temporary endeavor, within a unique context, undertaken to create value" (PMI, 2025). The inclusion of "value" in the foundational definition is not semantic. It signals a philosophical reorientation of the entire discipline away from process completion and toward organizational impact.

The JSOM redesign—approved and underway before this edition was published—is structurally aligned with its core orientation. The addition of a course titled Delivering Business Value Through Project Management directly mirrors PMI's redefinition. The elevation of leadership to a standalone course reflects PMBOK 8's emphasis on team empowerment, stakeholder-centered delivery, and the human dimensions of complex project environments. The Emerging Trends course positions students to engage with the AI, sustainability, and adaptive delivery themes that PMBOK 8 addresses explicitly.

For academic directors evaluating their own curricula against the Eighth Edition, a practical alignment exercise is to map each course's learning outcomes against PMBOK 8's core principles and identify which receive explicit, assessable treatment and which are assumed or absent. That mapping will surface redesign priorities more precisely than a general content review—and will produce documentation useful for both accreditation processes and advisory board conversations.

3.4 AI Integration as a Curriculum Requirement

PMBOK 8 includes a dedicated appendix on artificial intelligence in project management, covering AI applications in scheduling, risk forecasting, resource optimization, and project analytics. This formal inclusion reflects what practitioners have been observing for several years: AI tools are no longer peripheral to PM practice. They are increasingly embedded in the platforms project managers use daily.

The redesigned curriculum addresses this directly. One course requires students to complete PMI's AI in Project Management micro-credential as a graded deliverable. A signature exercise requires students to apply multiple AI tools to the same predictive analytics challenge and compare outputs in class. The exercise is designed to surface disagreement between tools—because the critical learning objective is not the output itself but the student's capacity to interrogate why tools disagree, identify the assumptions driving each result, and apply professional judgment to the specific project context at hand. Graduate PM programs that treat AI as an optional module or an academic integrity concern rather than a professional competency are leaving a significant gap in their graduates' preparation.

3.5 PMI Authorized Training Partner Status and PDU Delivery

A meaningful milestone in the program's evolution was its designation as a PMI Authorized Training Partner (ATP). It is important to be precise about what this means in this context: the certificate program itself is designed to develop best-in-class project management practitioners equipped with the knowledge, judgment, and applied skills that the profession demands. It is not a PMP exam preparation course. However, students who complete the certificate will have accumulated the project management experience hours and education that the PMP credential requires—and for those who wish to pursue the PMP, the path is clear.

As an augmentation to the Executive Education PM offering, a standalone PMP Exam Preparation course has been added through the executive education division. This course is open to current students, program alumni, and professionals with no prior JSOM affiliation—extending the program's professional development reach into the broader Dallas-Fort Worth practitioner community.

ATP status also enables the program to independently award Professional Development Units (PDUs) aligned with PMI's Talent Triangle—Ways of Working, Power Skills, and Business

Acumen—without relying on a third-party co-sponsorship arrangement. As an ATP, the program can offer PDUs directly for conference attendance, for programs such as the PMP Exam Preparation course, and for future professional development offerings as they are introduced. This capability directly supports the program's symposium and conference activities, which generate PDU credit for practitioner attendees under the program's own ATP authorization.

4. Implementation: Managing the Redesign as a Project

A curriculum redesign initiative has all the characteristics of a complex project: defined scope, constrained schedule, multiple stakeholders with competing priorities, significant governance requirements, and outcomes that depend on change management as much as content quality. Managing the JSOM redesign with explicit project discipline accelerated progress and created accountability through a governance period that coincided with a major accreditation cycle.

4.1 The GAC Reaccreditation Context

The curriculum redesign did not happen in a vacuum. It unfolded concurrently with the program's GAC (Global Accreditation Center) reaccreditation—a rigorous, multi-month process that culminated in a two-day onsite review by GAC evaluators. Much of the preparatory work for reaccreditation was already underway when the academic director joined the program; the redesign effort ran in parallel, and the revised curriculum was reviewed and approved as part of the accreditation process itself. The program was successfully reaccredited for a further six years.

This context matters for two reasons. First, it demonstrates that meaningful curriculum transformation is achievable within active accreditation cycles—it does not have to wait for a clean window. Second, it illustrates the relationship between curriculum quality and accreditation outcomes: a program that can demonstrate deliberate, evidence-based curriculum evolution, with documented learning outcome alignment and a clear rationale for each change, is better positioned in accreditation review than one presenting a static curriculum with periodic minor updates.

For academic directors navigating GAC or AACSB review cycles, the curriculum redesign process documented in this paper—particularly the learning outcome mapping exercise and the stakeholder documentation artifacts—generated materials that served double duty as both curriculum governance records and accreditation evidence.

4.2 Stakeholder Mapping and Governance

Curriculum redesign in a university setting involves stakeholder communities that differ fundamentally in their success criteria, decision-making authority, and communication preferences. The JSOM redesign engaged four primary stakeholder communities: the program's industry advisory board, whose input grounded the gap analysis in current employer expectations;

faculty colleagues teaching within the certificate sequence, whose pedagogical expertise shaped course-level design decisions; the AACSB and GAC accreditation frameworks' Assurance of Learning requirements, which defined the constraints within which learning outcomes must be structured and assessed; and the university administration responsible for course catalog approval, whose timelines and formatting requirements determined the implementation schedule.

Mapping these stakeholder groups early—identifying their interests, their influence over specific decisions, and their preferred engagement modes—compressed the governance timeline considerably. Academic directors undertaking similar redesigns should note that governance committees evaluate curriculum proposals differently than industry partners do. Faculty governance processes are concerned with academic rigor, disciplinary grounding, and assessment validity. Industry partners are concerned with graduate preparation and employer relevance. These concerns are complementary but not identical, and proposals that speak only to one audience will encounter unnecessary friction from the other.

4.3 Phased Implementation

The implementation was structured in three phases:

- Phase 1 (Immediate): Update course names, descriptions, and learning outcomes; process Course Catalogue revisions through academic governance; secure approvals for new course additions. The strategic decision here—to work within existing course structures rather than trigger full replacement processes—was what made the compressed timeline achievable.
- Phase 2 (Current): Deliver the redesigned curriculum sequence; develop the PMP Prep augmentation course; integrate PMI ATP resources; establish the agile elective track availability for the next cohort.
- Phase 3 (Ongoing): Continuous improvement through structured feedback cycles—student course evaluations, alumni outcome tracking, advisory board annual review, and faculty reflection. Success criterion: documented improvement cycle with annual curriculum review tied to accreditation AoL reporting.

As of this writing, the program has completed its first full delivery cycle under the redesigned curriculum. The agile elective track, while approved, will be offered beginning in the next academic year. This is a normal feature of phased curriculum implementation: approval and delivery operate on different timelines, and the vision for a component does not require its immediate full execution to be worth pursuing.

4.4 Technology Integration

The redesigned curriculum currently integrates Microsoft Project as the primary professional tool within relevant course modules, alongside structured PM simulations that give students hands-on experience with project lifecycle management in a controlled environment. The simulation component is particularly valuable for working professionals who bring project experience to the classroom: it provides a structured setting in which to test and stress-test decision-making under conditions that approximate real project complexity without the organizational stakes.

The longer-term vision for technology integration includes expanding the tool set to include platforms such as Jira and Smartsheet as the curriculum matures, and incorporating the Agile delivery simulation as a full cohort experience once the track reaches full enrollment. The principle guiding these decisions is consistent: technology integration should develop the judgment to evaluate and apply tools professionally, not simply tool proficiency in isolation.

5. Industry Engagement: Sustaining Curriculum Relevance

The most carefully designed curriculum will drift from industry relevance without structural mechanisms for ongoing reconnection with the profession. The Executive Education PM program at JSOM has built industry engagement into its operating model through two primary platforms and a developing vision for sustained practitioner dialogue.

5.1 The Annual PM Symposium and Virtual Conference

The annual UTD Project Management Symposium brings together practitioners, faculty, and students around themes aligned with the program's curriculum architecture. The event generates PDU credit across all three dimensions of PMI's Talent Triangle—Ways of Working, Power Skills, and Business Acumen—under the program's own ATP authorization, providing concrete professional value to practitioner attendees while signaling the program's alignment with PMI's professional development framework.

Alongside the Symposium, the program hosts an annual Virtual PM Conference that is global in scope, drawing speakers and attendees from Europe, Asia, Latin America, and beyond. The virtual format removes geographic barriers to participation and reflects a deliberate commitment to positioning the program within the international PM community rather than exclusively the local one. Together, these two events function as the program's primary mechanisms for sustained industry engagement—bringing the professional conversation into the academic program rather than waiting for advisory board cycles to surface it.

Participation in external professional events—including PMI Global Conference, where academic directors, researchers, and senior practitioners converge around the profession's emerging challenges—complements the program's own events by providing exposure to discourse

happening at the leading edge of the field. For academic directors, these engagements are not merely professional development. They are curriculum intelligence.

5.2 Developing Industry Engagement Structures

Beyond the Symposium and Virtual Conference, the program is developing a practitioner engagement model centered on regular practitioner dialogue. The near-term vision is a recurring fireside chat series—held bimonthly or quarterly—that brings industry practitioners into structured conversation with students and faculty on topics drawn directly from current corporate practice. The goal is not the one-time guest lecture but a sustained rhythm of practitioner voice within the academic program: keeping the curriculum in active conversation with what is happening in organizations rather than relying on formal review cycles to surface the gap.

A capstone project model is also part of the program's forward vision. The intended structure would provide students with a clear capstone framework and methodology, then have them identify an organization—employer, community partner, or professional contact—whose real project challenge serves as the capstone context. This approach develops the students' own professional network and proposal skills while grounding their academic work in genuine organizational need. It is a vision for the next academic year rather than a current offering, and it is named here as direction rather than accomplished fact.

6. Lessons for Academic Directors and Faculty Leaders

The redesign documented in this paper is specific to one program at one institution. The framework that produced it is not. The following lessons are offered as practical guidance for academic directors, faculty governance participants, and institutional leaders navigating similar redesign challenges.

6.1 Treat the Redesign as a Project

Curriculum redesign benefits from the same disciplined management that PM programs teach their students to apply to organizational initiatives. Define scope clearly: what will change and what will not, and within which governance pathway. Establish a realistic schedule that accounts for catalog deadlines and governance review cycles. Map stakeholders and their decision-making authority before encountering resistance. Define what done looks like: approved curriculum, delivered courses, measurable outcomes, and a continuous improvement mechanism that will surface when the next redesign is needed.

Programs that treat redesign as an ongoing conversation without milestones, owners, or deliverables tend to produce incremental updates rather than structural transformation. The current

professional environment—PMBOK 8, AI integration, shifting employer expectations—warrants structural transformation, and that requires project discipline.

6.2 Know What Requires Approval and What Does Not

One of the most practical lessons from the JSOM redesign is the value of understanding institutional governance with precision. Course name and description changes, learning outcome updates, and elective track additions each carry different approval requirements and timelines. An academic director who maps the governance landscape before beginning the redesign can structure the initiative to achieve maximum impact within achievable timelines—rather than discovering governance constraints after design decisions have already been made.

In the JSOM case, this meant achieving substantial curriculum transformation through course redesign within existing course numbers, while managing new course additions through the appropriate separate process. The result was a significantly modernized curriculum delivered on a timeline that a full course replacement process would not have permitted.

6.3 Use Reaccreditation as an Opportunity, Not Just an Obligation

Accreditation cycles are frequently experienced as compliance burdens. The JSOM redesign experience suggests a different framing: reaccreditation is the most powerful forcing function available for curriculum improvement, because it creates an external deadline, requires documentation discipline, and produces institutional attention that curriculum review alone rarely generates. Academic directors who treat the accreditation preparation process as a curriculum audit—using it to surface misalignments between stated learning outcomes, course content, and industry expectations—extract far more value from the process than those who treat it as a documentation exercise.

6.4 Build for Continuous Improvement from Day One

No curriculum is complete at launch. The first delivery cycle of any redesigned program surfaces assumptions that needed testing and opportunities that only emerge when real students engage with real content. Academic directors who treat first-cycle delivery as a pilot—building in structured mechanisms for capturing what is learned and feeding it back into the curriculum—create programs that improve systematically. The practical mechanisms are straightforward: end-of-course surveys that ask specifically about the gap between course content and professional application; annual advisory board sessions structured around specific curriculum questions; and faculty reflection at the end of each semester. These are not bureaucratic activities. They are the operating infrastructure of a living curriculum.

7. Conclusion

Graduate project management programs occupy a distinctive position in professional education. They serve a profession that is simultaneously foundational and rapidly evolving, and they are accountable to a professional body—PMI—that updates its standards with increasing frequency and ambition. That combination creates a curriculum management challenge that most academic governance models were not designed to meet at the required pace.

The redesign documented in this paper demonstrates that the challenge is manageable—but only when it is approached with the intentionality and discipline that PM programs teach their students to bring to complex organizational initiatives. Gap analysis before prescription. Stakeholder alignment before governance submission. Strategic use of approval pathways to achieve maximum change within achievable timelines. Phased implementation with defined milestones. And continuous improvement as an operating principle built in from the start, not added after the fact.

The PMBOK® Guide, Eighth Edition's redefinition of a project as a mechanism for creating value applies with equal force to the curricula that train project managers. The relevant question is not what courses a program offers. It is what professional capability those courses reliably produce—in graduates who can navigate uncertainty, lead through complexity, deliver organizational value, and adapt their practice to an environment that will keep changing faster than any static curriculum can track.

The redesign at JSOM is one answer to that question, at one institution, at this moment. The framework that produced it is available to any program willing to apply it with rigor and patience.

The question every academic director should be asking is not 'What courses do we offer?' It is 'What professional capability do we reliably produce—and how do we know?'

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