

Planning Your OLS 680 Project

OLS 680, Research in OLS, provides an opportunity to do an applied research project. This means that you will work with a real organization to solve a problem or to enhance a process (e.g., a job redesign, a training program, a culture audit, a systemic change initiative) and, if appropriate, measure its effects. Quite a bit of thinking and planning will be required before you take OLS 680.

As Salas and Kosarzycki (2003) observe, organizations often fail to incorporate much of what has been learned about designing, delivering, implementing, and evaluating training. Unfortunately, that often is true for other types of organizational interventions as well. Why don't organizations do more to find out if their interventions work? One reason is that many of them do not know how to measure the effects or adequately assess the need for projects and interventions. The goal of OLS 680 is to prepare you to be able to diagnose, design, implement, and evaluate change in organizations. While your major professor and advisory committee will be available for advice, this must be a self-driven endeavor, a way to show you can apply what you have learned throughout the program.

Your OLS 680 project should be planned carefully, so that it is substantive, but feasible to accomplish in the time allotted, and of practical use to an organization. Here is a recommended timeline:

- OLS 680 is the last course you take in the graduate program.
- Two semesters before you plan to take OLS 680, identify two or three ideas you think have potential for your 680 project. Three early questions to consider are: What do you want to learn more about? What is the goal of each project? Where would each project be conducted?
- Meet with the graduate director and a potential major professor to discuss your preliminary ideas and potential members for your advisory committee. You will choose three people (two must be OLS graduate faculty); one of them will be your major professor, the person you will work with most directly on your project. Once your committee is in place, set up an appointment to discuss your ideas with the committee. Your advisory committee will provide you with feedback about your ideas and their potential as a 680 project. During this time and throughout the process, your committee may assign readings or learning modules to be completed.
- Once a project idea has been accepted, start reviewing the literature. What research has been done that will inform your efforts? What techniques would help you maximize the effectiveness of your intervention?
- Next, prepare a proposal and a contingency plan describing your prospective project. The proposal should be clear about what you want to accomplish and how you will go about it.
- The reason for a well thought out contingency plan is that it is not unusual for organizations to cancel projects, even after they are underway.
- Soon after receiving your proposal, the advisory committee will give you feedback. Committee members will send their feedback to the major professor. The major professor will review the feedback and compile it for the student, noting any contradictions among committee members as points for further discussion.
- Use their recommendations to edit and improve the proposal, and get it back to the advisory committee (recommended time to do that is two weeks). Expect to have multiple iterations of

feedback and rewriting. It is important that the proposal is clear and that everyone understands the project alternatives.

- Once the committee approves your proposal, submit it to the key decision makers in the organization where you intend to implement the project. Obtain their feedback about your project's perceived value, feasibility, and relevance to the organization's strategic objectives. Questions to consider at this stage: Who are the stakeholders and decision-makers in the organization regarding this project? How much support will top management provide to the project? How much are the affected employees likely to support it? What restraining forces or challenges are you likely to encounter? To what degree will management buy in to a prolonged and potentially disruptive change effort?
- After your discussion with organizational stakeholders, contact advisory committee members about what you learned.
- Depending on reactions you received, it may now be possible to create a project agreement. This document will describe the project, needed resources and commitments, and lay out a proposed timeline. You should also have a solid "plan B" at this point, in case the original project cannot be completed. The project agreement may also need to go through several edit cycles with your advisory committee. Once this document is accepted by your committee, you will submit it to the organization for approval. Approval will be designated by obtaining signatures on the document: those of the director of the OLS graduate program, your major professor, a senior staff person at the organization where you will complete your project, and the member of the organization most directly involved with the project.
- Once your proposal has been approved and the agreement signed, you are eligible to enroll in OLS 680.
- The semester before you take OLS 680, you may begin to collect "pre-measures" (i.e., baseline data). This is usually necessary to measure the effects of your intervention. In other words, you need to have a clear understanding of the status of the setting or behavior you are going to change before you change it. It is recommended that you strategize with your advisory committee, managers, and employees in the host organization about how to successfully collect pre-intervention data without arousing suspicion, defensiveness, or irritation.
- When appropriate, collect your pre-intervention data using your pre-measures (e.g., focus groups, questionnaires, archival data) and have them ready to organize and use as you begin 680, so you have a thorough dataset on the setting or behavior prior to implementing your project.
- During the term you enroll in the 680 course, the focus will be on helping you interpret that data, prepare and implement an intervention, and - if appropriate to your project - measure its results. It will be a hands-on, focused, quick-moving, highly developmental experience.
- Remember: The learning and synthesis of this course are key, so enrollment will be based on readiness. You need approval from the OLS graduate program director before registering for OLS 680. Approval is dependent upon a combination of evidence of readiness to take the course, including input from your advisory committee. The course will not be completed in full until the project result and final paper have the approval of your major professor and advisory committee. Please factor this into your planning and degree-completion timeline.

Reference

- Salas, E., & Kosarzycki, M. P. (2003). Why don't organizations pay attention to (and use) findings from the science of training? *Human Resource Development Quarterly*, 14, 487-491.